

# SFA National Small Business Awards 2019



Small Firms Association, 84-86 Lower Baggot Street, Dublin 2. Tel: 01 605 1500; Email: [info@sfa.ie](mailto:info@sfa.ie); Web: [www.sfa.ie](http://www.sfa.ie) #SFAAwards2019

## SPONSORS



## PARTNERS



# Thank you for your support!



IE Domain Registry



## GO RAIBH MAITH AGAIBH ...

We would like to thank all our sponsors for their valuable support in making the **SFA National Small Business Awards** such a success over the last 15 years.

We look forward to continuing these relationships with another successful year in 2019.

PRESENTED BY



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

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

🐦 SFA\_Irl | 📺 Small Firms Association | #SFAAwards2019

SFA National  
Small Business  
Awards

# CONTENTS

Introduction from Sven Spollen-Behrens, SFA director	4
Paul Healy, chief executive, Skillnet Ireland	4
<b>INSIGHTS</b>	
Michael Dawson, founder and CEO, One4All	5
<b>OUTSTANDING SMALL BUSINESS</b>	
Passion, drive and a keen focus on innovation	6
<b>INSIGHTS</b>	
Gillian Willis, small business manager, Bord Bia	9
<b>FOOD AND DRINK</b>	
Staying ahead of the curve with consumer trends	10
<b>INSIGHTS</b>	
Padraig Sheerin, head of SME at Three Ireland	13
<b>SERVICES</b>	
A relentless desire to put the customer first	14
<b>INSIGHTS</b>	
Patrick Farrell, retail banking director at Permanent TSB	17
<b>INNOVATOR OF THE YEAR</b>	
Identifying problems and unmet needs	18
<b>INSIGHTS</b>	
Colin Bebbington, retail director at Bord Gáis Energy	21
<b>MANUFACTURING</b>	
New product development at its best	22
<b>INSIGHTS</b>	
Andrea Carroll, SME programme manager, SEAI	24
<b>SUSTAINABLE ENERGY</b>	
Taking the environment into account	25
<b>INSIGHTS</b>	
David Curtin, chief executive, IE Domain Registry	27
<b>EMERGING NEW BUSINESS</b>	
Five small businesses with great ideas	28
<b>INSIGHTS</b>	
Fergus McMahon, department manager for exporter development at Enterprise Ireland	30
<b>EXPORTER OF THE YEAR</b>	
Going the extra mile internationally	31

**Editor:** Sorcha Corcoran  
**Design:** Robert Armstrong, INM Design Studio, Belfast Telegraph House, Clarendon Dock, 33 Clarendon Road, Belfast, BT1 3BG  
 Published by Independent Newspapers Ltd, 27-32 Talbot Street, Dublin 1

## Comment from the chair

I am delighted to offer my congratulations to all the 2019 finalists in the SFA National Small Business Awards programme. Now in their fifteenth year, these awards celebrate achievement, innovation and excellence amongst small firms. It is these very qualities that are evident in the companies featured in this special awards supplement.

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

The people involved here are truly representative of the diversity of entrepreneurship in Ireland, from new high-tech companies to established and traditional, family-run businesses. Given the right environment, these companies will play a significant part in delivering the additional 25,500 jobs that the Small Firms Association expects to be created by small businesses in 2019. These companies will also provide much encouragement to others who are thinking about taking the entrepreneurial leap.

As we face into uncertainty and unknown challenges it is encouraging to see such innovation in our small businesses. Innovation will be a key contributor to achieving competitiveness post Brexit, when potentially we will be competing on a very different stage. It will be so important to harness the energy, agility and determination of the businesses we read about in this supplement. They need to be supported by creating a business environment that values small business, fosters 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 availed of a subsidised training package and a strategic management masterclass weekend. They have all showcased their products



and services in the Awards Village at SFA Business Connect at the Aviva Stadium, which brought together over 350 companies at a networking event between large and small businesses.

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: Three, Bord Bia, Permanent TSB, One4All, Enterprise Ireland, IE Domain Registry, Skillnet Ireland, the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, and Bord Gáis Energy.

Our very hard-working judges include: Mairead Cirillo of Environmental Business Advice; Paula Fitzsimons of Fitzsimons Consulting; Barry McCleary of Megazyme International; 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, EY Ireland, Geraldine Lavin, 3rd i and Ken Germaine, Germaine Business Planning.

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

**Sue O'Neill**  
SFA chair

### SPONSORS



### PARTNERS



## DRIVE AND PERSEVERANCE

The importance of small businesses to the Irish economy continues to be reflected in the SFA National Small Business Awards, writes Sven Spollen-Behrens, director of the Small Firms Association

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

2018 was a challenging but successful year for small businesses. According to the latest Small Business Sentiment Survey, difficulties attracting staff, Brexit and increasing business costs are the main obstacles affecting small firms in 2019. Our members see domestic economic growth, which is forecasted to be close to 4.1% in 2019, as the biggest opportunity for their business in the coming year.

However, small business owners' intention to invest in their businesses declined over recent months. In the run-up to Brexit it is to be expected that small firms will be more cautious regarding investment decisions until there is more certainty about what the

final relationship between the EU and UK will look like.

Despite ongoing uncertainty, two thirds of SFA member companies plan to take on additional staff and we estimate that together small businesses will create 25,500 jobs in 2019. These jobs will be in a wide variety of sectors, giving a boost to villages, towns and cities across Ireland.

**“Despite ongoing uncertainty, two thirds of SFA member companies plan to take on additional staff and we estimate that together small businesses will create 25,500 jobs in 2019”**



Sven Spollen-Behrens, director of the Small Firms Association

Concrete steps are needed from government to realise the potential of our small business sector and enhance job creation permanently. The SFA is calling for the introduction and implementation of a national Small Business Strategy for Ireland. This initiative is calling on government to target the development of small business across all regions with just as much energy and strategic focus as it has put on attracting FDI from the 1950s to the present day.

The finalists in this year's SFA National Small Business Awards come from a

wide variety of backgrounds, sectors and parts of the country. They all demonstrate that with a clear business vision, a sense of optimism, passion, drive and perseverance, success is possible.

I want to congratulate all the finalists today. Regardless of the outcome this evening, you are all winners and deserve every success; the quality and standard of all finalists is really second to none.

*To find out who the winners are and to view highlights from the Gala Final, log on to [www.sfa.ie/awards](http://www.sfa.ie/awards).*

## PROMOTING PRODUCTIVITY



Paul Healy, chief executive of Skillnet Ireland, highlights the vital need for small businesses to focus on training and development in the face of rapid technological change

Creating a culture of up-skilling and lifelong learning is an important part of the solution to stagnating productivity within small firms. Responsible for 70% of all employment, small businesses are the backbone of the Irish economy, and management development and up-skilling are key to helping them to remain competitive.

Some core competencies and skills every business should have include strategic planning and efficient operational management – both of which are critical in terms of enabling digital transformation. Technological disruption is happening at a pace never seen before in areas such as automation and artificial intelligence. Training or on-the-job learning is vital for smaller businesses in readying themselves for the changes and having the ability to embrace new technologies.

Skillnet Ireland is a national agency

dedicated to the promotion and facilitation of workforce learning in Ireland. We believe that maintaining a highly skilled workforce is essential to our national competitiveness. Our business is to ensure that your business has the skills it needs to thrive.

The most important aspect of Skillnet Ireland is that it is a bottom-up, industry-led programme. The 17,000 companies nationwide that we support are taking control of the skills agenda themselves. They are deciding on the challenges and opportunities they face and using Skillnet Ireland funding to allow them to embrace these fully through the training and up-skilling of their employees.

Through our 65-plus Skillnet Learning Networks, Skillnet Ireland allocates funding to groups of companies in the same industry sector (or region) and with similar training needs, so they can deliver subsidised training for their teams.

We are delighted to be establishing



Paul Healy, chief executive, Skillnet Ireland

the first-ever dedicated SFA Skillnet in the first quarter of this year. Under the leadership of SFA director Sven Spollen-Behrens, the SFA is making the skills and talent agenda a priority through this initiative. Together, we are currently gathering requirements from the SFA

**“Training or on-the-job learning is vital for smaller businesses in readying themselves for the changes and having the ability to embrace new technologies”**

membership base and distilling those into a compelling skills offering.

The main message we want to give to owners of small firms is to engage with their Skillnet. This will give them the opportunity to shape the skills agenda and avail of subsidised training for their staff – which at the end of the day are the most important asset of any business.

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

# GIFTING GOES MOBILE

One4All will soon be launching a groundbreaking new digital product which represents the next step in the evolution of staff gifting and rewards

**D**ue on the market in April, the new One4all Digital Gift Card will allow businesses and individuals to buy, customise, send and spend a One4all Gift Card, all from their mobile phone. A new One4all Payment app on iOS and Android will mean customers can spend their digital gift card directly from their phone via contactless terminals in store or online.

The digital card offers all the functionality of a physical One4all Gift Card with the added benefits of instant delivery, complete end-to-end security and full card and message customisation.

“For the first time, businesses will be able to reward five to 5,000 staff members in an instant with a digital gift card they can spend in over 8,500 stores nationwide,” says Michael Dawson, founder and CEO of One4All.

“The technology behind this product is the first of its kind in the world, offering market-leading functionality that has been built from the ground up by One4all with B2B gifting in mind. Whether a business wishes to provide an annual ‘thank you’ to its staff or regular bonuses throughout the year, the digital gift card provides the ultimate flexibility to suit their needs.”

#### Adapting to change

One4All started as The Gift Voucher Shop in 2002, from which the One4all brand (and paper multi-store voucher) quickly grew. When Dawson started the business, he developed a strategic distribution partnership with An Post. The company’s core offering, that of “convenient gifting and reward”, has maintained throughout its history.

The company has expanded geographically to Malta and the UK and product-wise from paper vouchers to plastic gift cards in 2006 and now to digital gifting. Employee numbers have

grown from 10 to over 70. One4All’s branch selling outlets have increased from 1,000 to over 13,500 and accepting retail outlets from a few hundred to over 50,000.

“We have continually updated our product and product offering to meet the changing needs of the market, introducing, for example, card personalisation for individual customers and card customisation [such as branded gift cards] for businesses,” says Dawson.

“As online shopping became more and more important to our customers, we brought our card online, allowing customers the choice of whether to spend their gift cards in store or online with hundreds of different brands. Now, with mobile wallets, instant gifting and contactless payments becoming the norm in daily life, the One4all Digital Gift Card is being introduced to provide an instant, convenient and exciting way to buy, customise, send and spend your One4all Gift Card.”

#### Meeting expectations

Dawson has seen a lot of changes in relation to gift cards generally since he first started the business. As the popularity of gift cards has grown, so has the spotlight on and level of expectation from gift card providers.

“When we started The Gift Voucher Shop, it was a novel and innovative concept to go to your local Post Office to get a gift voucher for many different stores. That became a single voucher for many stores, then a plastic gift card [with improved acceptance levels in retailers],” he explains. “We’re very proud to have led the charge on what a gift card can and should offer the gifter and recipient, and we continue to do so in 2019 with this new digital product.”

One4All’s growth and development



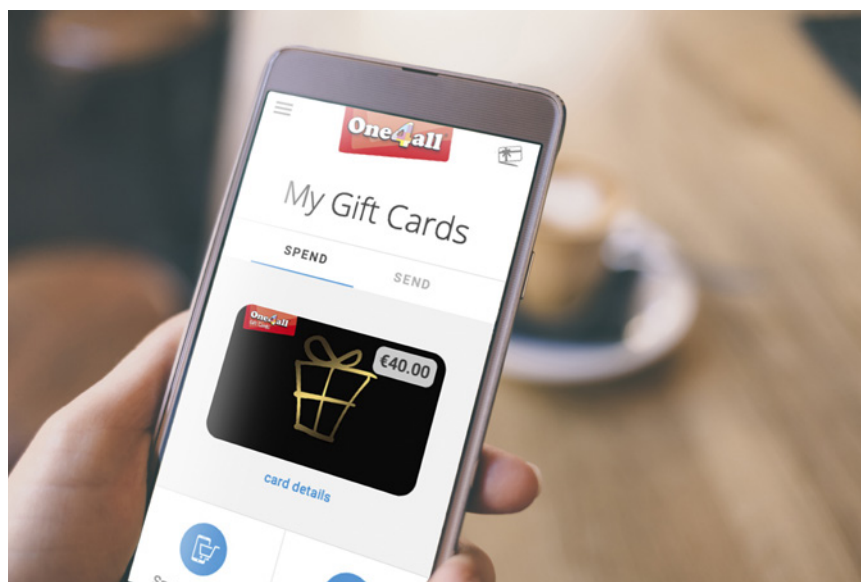
Michael Dawson, founder and CEO, One4All

has happened in the context of a rapidly evolving payments industry landscape. “Only two decades ago as consumers we were just falling in love with ATMs. Cash remained king up to the noughties when card-based payments began to eat into cash payments,” Dawson notes.

“Today we are finally witnessing, after a few false dawns, the emergence of

wallet-based contactless payments driving transaction volumes through convenience at retail outlets and simplified online shopping checkouts. This development will continue to drive more commerce online and mobile. Hence One4All is aiming to be a leader in this space for the gift and reward industry.”

**“The technology behind this product is the first of its kind in the world, offering market-leading functionality that has been built from the ground up by One4all with B2B gifting in mind”**



One4All’s new digital gift card



David Byrne, business development manager and Professor Gerry Byrne, CEO of GB Innovation

## Ready for research

The bespoke platform launched by GB Innovation last November reduces the cost and uncertainty of research, development and innovation activities for companies

**F**ounded by Professor Gerry Byrne in 2014, GB Innovation has created ReaDI-Watch, a software platform that brings all of the elements involved in the research, development and innovation (RD&I) value stream together in one place.

A former dean of engineering in University College Dublin, Byrne started the company to address the gaps he identified in this space.

“Senior managers tasked with steering research and development projects quickly find they lack clear metrics, outputs or key performance indicators,” he explains. “This is because research projects are inherently different to regular projects and are difficult to manage. The support schemes available for RD&I in Ireland and abroad are diverse, yet in practice are not easy to avail of. Companies struggle to derive benefit from the research and innovation network and ecosystem.”

Byrne spent ten years in industry working on research and innovation projects. His role as expert on the Irish Revenue Panel for R&D Tax Credits and on the Research, Development and Innovation Board of Enterprise Ireland gave the GB Innovation team a unique insight into the complexities of RD&I.

GB Innovation started out by providing a service to companies to support them in the management of their research and innovation processes. Having grown both in terms of client base and resources, the company launched ReaDI-Watch last November. It is a simple to use, cloud-based, cost-effective platform and service to meet all of a company’s RD&I needs.

“ReaDI-Watch is a complete solution

that captures all activities and projects and puts them on a single platform to digitise, manage and partially automate the RD&I process,” explains Byrne. “We have developed clear metrics for companies to guide them along the research and innovation journey. This allows them to achieve excellence in research and development, enhance their competitiveness and grow in value.”

The six people currently employed by GB Innovation all have a wealth of RD&I expertise and commercial acumen. Byrne plans to double the team within 14 months. He also wants the company to become an Enterprise Ireland client this year to facilitate an international presence and export sales in the near future.

“As the company grows and takes on both new personnel and clients, the platform will evolve to facilitate this growth. ReaDI-Watch is the first of its kind in the area of RD&I and, as such, will require continuous development to explore the full potential of its applicability,” adds Byrne.

**“ReaDI-Watch is a complete solution that captures all activities and projects and puts them on a single platform to digitise, manage and partially automate the RD&I process”**

## Automate to accumulate

From its base in Thurles, Co Tipperary, Horan Automation and Consulting is at the cutting edge of the latest developments in global manufacturing

**H**oran Automation and Consulting specialises in industrial automation, including the design, machine construction, PLC (programmable logic controller) and machine integration and maintenance of automation systems.

With a staff of six and over 20 years’ experience in robotics and factory industrial automation, the company has expertise in the food, healthcare, pharmaceutical and manufacturing industries in Ireland. Further to tripling sales since 2016, it expects to recruit ten new staff this year.

Using its in-depth knowledge of industrial automation systems, robotic arms and manufacturing, Horan Automation and Consulting aims to increase clients’ production and improve their manufacturing efficiency. It has designed automation systems and installed customised automation systems for many of the top manufacturing companies in Ireland, including Glaxosmythkline, Boston Scientific, Abbott, Serosep, Glanbia, Stryker and Saint Gobain.

“We build bespoke automation

**“Often our customers either cannot get staff, for example in the meat industry, or they cannot meet speed and accuracy of demand and need to automate”**

solutions for our customers to solve their problems,” explains commercial director Emma Lacy. “This can be in the form of automated machines and often includes robots. Our machines solve issues with health and safety, such as heavy lifting or repetitive stress injury. Often our customers either cannot get staff, for example in the meat industry, or they cannot meet speed and accuracy of demand and need to automate.”

Describing itself as “a one-stop shop for automation”, Horan Automation and Consulting designs and specifies its machines in Ireland and uses an original equipment manufacturer in China to build them. “This is to our specification using our parts such as Kuka robots so our machines are top quality. We can provide bespoke solutions that are CE marked to EU quality standards,” says Lacy. “This means we can pass a saving of about 20% on to our customers compared to our competition in Europe.”

Despite the ongoing issue of Brexit, Horan Automation and Consulting is looking at overseas expansion. “That is proving a big challenge for us, more indirectly as it is affecting our customers. Our lead time from consultation to order can be as long as two years, which in itself proves challenging. Brexit is elongating an already challenging timeline,” notes Lacy.

Horan Automation and Consulting recently embarked on its export journey with the support of Enterprise Ireland. It has already met potential clients in the UK, Poland, the Czech Republic and Saudi Arabia. Lacy is optimistic about where this will lead: “We really pride ourselves on our customer service and quality focus throughout the business. We are punching well above our weight with our customer profile for a small company.”



Gerry Horan, managing director and Emma Lacy, commercial director, Horan Automation and Consulting

## Clever coating

Based in Co Wexford, NP Liquid Glass Systems is a family-run business specialising in providing long-lasting and environmentally-friendly solutions for surface protection



Rachel and John Murphy, co-founders, NP Liquid Glass Systems

**R**achel Murphy and her father John were looking for a solution for damp issues in an old stone cottage, but needed a coating that wouldn't affect the colour and remained fully breathable.

They researched a number of options and learned about nano coatings, then found a supplier in Germany. "I left my job in the financial sector to set up the business in 2014 and thankfully have never looked back," says Rachel. "It was a risk bringing a brand new product to the market but we are going from strength to strength and have worked on some fantastic projects with brilliant customers in the past few years."

This has included working with Henry J Lyons on the Royal College of Surgeons Ireland and Central Bank of Ireland projects, as well as counting the Office of Public Works, Powerscourt Hotel, Ceadogán Rugs and Matt Britton Carpets among its clients.

Having introduced the products for stone and brick to the Irish market, Rachel and her father found there was also a demand for protection of other surfaces.

"We now provide a full service of surface protection options, from fabrics and carpets to anti-graffiti and anti-algae coatings for stone and brick. The variety of our work means we are working on different projects every day and with different clients all year round," she says.

The flexibility and range of NP Liquid Glass Systems' products and offerings give the company a competitive edge, according to Rachel. "Our coatings

are unique in the sense that they are all based on liquid glass and, unlike traditional products, all of our coatings are completely environmentally-friendly and toxin-free, making them child, pet and food safe," she explains.

"We can coat virtually any surface to prevent damp, staining and algae growth. We also have a unique offering in terms of our coatings for fabrics, rugs and carpets, which prevent staining without changing the colour or texture of the materials."

NP Liquid Glass Systems plans to launch its retail options later this year, which will include a bathroom kit for the protection of tiles and grout from staining. This is a completely eco-friendly option that is easy to apply in the home.

This year will also see it looking to expand the business. "At the moment it's just the two of us – my father and I. We plan to grow our team in 2019/2020 and ideally would like to expand our services in the UK in the coming months."

**"We now provide a full service of surface protection options, from fabrics and carpets to anti-graffiti and anti-algae coatings for stone and brick"**

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



David O'Connor, head of aftersales, Kia Motors Ireland and Brian Conroy, managing director, Pop Up Races (centre) with Irish Olympians Mick Clohisey and Kerry O'Flaherty

## A winning formula

Pop Up Races is focussed on ensuring race organisers are guaranteed an accurate and efficient racing environment, while also providing an accurate time for every participant

**P**articipation in world-class events such as the London Marathon, the Berlin Marathon and Ironman Austria has given the team at Pop Up Races a keen appreciation of what their end customers truly want.

Founded by brothers Brian and David Conroy, Pop Up Races offers a range of tiered services to help race organisers promote and event manage their races. This includes management of online entry, chip timing and providing experiential extras.

"We ensure that everyone counts – every race organiser and every participant, making it 'Your race from start to finish,'" explains managing director Brian, who is a chartered accountant. "Our target market is business race organisers, charities, clubs and event companies."

In 2018 Pop up Races hosted over 160 events, with over 100,000 participants, resulting in around €1.5m being raised for local businesses and charities. It currently has a staff of 14, which includes four office staff and 10 operations staff, who look after events on a part-time basis.

"Our team are predominately runners. When it comes to the live timing of races, everyone is focussed on ensuring we exceed the expectations of the race director as well as the individual athletes," says Brian. "We may be a small company, but we're making a big impact."

In the past few months, the brothers decided to completely revisit the company's business model to ensure it is as efficient as possible, while consistently improving on service. Working with Jigsaw Consulting and Kildare Local

Enterprise Office, they undertook a Lean for Micro initiative and introduced Lean standards across the organisation.

"A key area for improvement was how we manage our customers' data. As a result of this process we've implemented a bespoke customer relationship management [CRM] solution to alleviate manual processing and to protect our customers' personal data," Brian explains. "We also wanted to ensure that our staff have instant access to the information they need at any given time so customers' needs are always met."

Pop Up Races' long-term strategy is to expand into the UK and Europe within five years. "Our plan for 2019 was to aggressively target the UK market, but this has been put on hold with Brexit. Over the next 12 months, we are focussed on continuing to deliver for our existing customers," says Brian.

"Recent investment allows us to now cater for up to four events daily. With this increased capacity we are working on creating partnerships in new, previously unexplored markets, including canoeing, equestrian and open water swimming."

**"We ensure that everyone counts – every race organiser and every participant, making it 'Your race from start to finish'"**

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

## Fitting right in

With 40 years' experience supplying the heating/plumbing, DIY and hardware markets with bathroom accessories, SME Sales is always on the lookout for new and trending products to solve everyday problems



Michael Sweeney, director, SME Sales

**T**he Sta-Tite Toilet Seats introduced by SME Sales in the past two years solve one of the main issues in the bathroom area of the house. "This is a new patented system that ensures when the toilet seats are fitted they don't come loose on the pan, which makes this a simple solution to an age-old problem," says director of SME Sales Michael Sweeney, whose parents set up the business in 1979.

"We are also offering a solution to another huge problem, which is fitting bathroom accessories onto porcelain tiles that are extremely hard to drill. We are introducing a self-adhesive range of accessories that can be fitted in less than a minute with no drill required."

Operating out of a purpose-built warehouse in Collooney, Co Sligo since 2005, SME Sales also owns a similar sized warehouse next door. "We don't currently

**"Customer service remains the focus of our business and we strive to resolve issues as soon as they may arise. We act as distributors and agents for the suppliers we deal with"**

use it, but it future-proofs our business for expansion for many years to come," says Sweeney.

SME Sales currently has a staff of five, some of whom have been with the company for 15 years now. "With the nature of a small business, it is important that your staff have a 'can-do' attitude. Customer service remains the focus of our business and we strive to resolve issues as soon as they may arise. We act as distributors and agents for the suppliers we deal with," says Sweeney.

"Generally we offer next-day delivery so our customers can keep stock levels to a minimum, which helps with cash flow. This has been critical over the past 10 years. Credit control is crucial for a small business. We ensure our customers operate within their terms and review this on an ongoing basis."

Over the past few years SME Sales has invested heavily in its marketing strategy. It has introduced an online store as well as the 'Mercedes Sprinter Mobile Bathroom Showroom'. This customised service allows customers to view and have products demonstrated at their own location. "It has been a tremendous success," says Sweeney.

SME Sales is hoping to grow its external sales team in the short term, with a view to having each province covered by individual sales reps. "This would help increase our market share and drive sales growth. We are constantly on the lookout for new and innovative products and also new agencies to expand our product portfolio," notes Sweeney.



Claire and Willie McMahon, co-founders, Trefoil Controls

## Instrumental influence

Trefoil Controls' paperless calibration management process is helping it to stand out from the crowd and will drive continued growth in 2019

**W**illie McMahon set up Trefoil Controls with his wife Claire in 2015 after amassing over 20 years' experience in calibration services across sectors such as food and dairy, manufacturing and pharmaceuticals.

"Primarily we focus on delivering specific calibration management solutions to clients, especially SMEs not catered for by the large calibration providers," he explains. "Our size allows us to offer flexible, bespoke solutions. All of our clients have access to a dedicated customer portal for the safe, secure storage of all documentation."

"We have a growing client base in Ireland and abroad for instrumentation product sales. The supply of instrumentation specific to the clients' needs and the calibration service we offer complement each other and support our clients' operations."

McMahon believes that his company's presentation of calibration records is its unique selling point. Each time it conducts a calibration, the results are entered electronically into the calibration software package. The certificate is created and then placed onto the secure online dedicated customer portal. Authorised client representatives can then view the calibration results as they wish from their phone or PC.

Also stored on the customer portal are all the quality, health and safety, and procedural documents that are required to back up the contracts the company has with its clients. In McMahon's view, this paperless solution combined with the way staff actively manage and schedule the calibrations give Trefoil Controls a reputation of quality in the market.

This reputation has translated into increased sales both at home and abroad.

For example, in 2015 Trefoil Controls began supplying instrumentation and reference calibration equipment to Alvotech, a biopharmaceutical company in Reykjavik, Iceland. More recently, Bio-Marine Ingredients Ireland engaged Trefoil Controls as its calibration management provider for the building of a state-of-the-art €12m research and development facility in Co Monaghan.

"Sales have grown year on year and we have a very strong, loyal relationship with successive managers on sites. Our collaboration with similar-sized calibration houses in Ireland has allowed us to scale up in terms of engineering resources for projects where clients would have a maintenance shutdown for a few days," says McMahon.

**"Our size allows us to offer flexible, bespoke solutions. All of our clients have access to a dedicated customer portal for the safe, secure storage of all documentation"**

Trefoil Controls' engineering team is made up of two and a further two staff look after administration. "Due to the growth and expansion of our business, we are in the process of employing two more engineers for our team. There are some very interesting instrumentation projects coming in 2019," says McMahon.

"Our client base is growing across all business sectors within Ireland. Equally, existing clients are scheduling process improvements, which will create requirements for both instrumentation sales and calibrations during the coming year."



# FEEDING INTO SUCCESS

At the end of 2018, Bord Bia launched its Small Business commercial marketing strategy 2019 - 2021, which is giving it a clearer view on how to support the growth of small food businesses

**A**n important aspect of Bord Bia's new strategy is that it segments small business into artisan, established, start-ups and in-growth companies, and highlights the need to provide tailored supports for each.

"Small food and drink businesses are important contributors to the sustainability and future prosperity of the Irish economy. They underpin the wider local community and the image of Ireland as a provider of high quality, innovative and sustainable food excellence," says Gillian Willis, small business manager, Bord Bia.

"In Bord Bia we define the small business sector as businesses with an annual turnover of less than €3.5m. Estimated to be worth between €300m-€450m in Ireland, it is a diverse sector encompassing meat, craft beer, dairy, prepared consumer foods, and seafood."

## Specific support programmes

Bord Bia runs various programmes to support small businesses, which are designed to be closely aligned with their needs going forward.

Foodworks, run by Bord Bia, Enterprise Ireland and Teagasc, is an accelerator programme helping to develop the next generation of scale-able and export-driven Irish food businesses. The programme gives companies the unique opportunity to work with the three agencies to gain a greater understanding of their consumers, their market viability and the technical support needed to develop their product.

Bord Bia partners with a number of Irish supermarket chains on their retailer programmes Grow with Aldi, KickStart (Lidl) and Food Academy (SuperValu). 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.

This month Bord Bia is launching its third series of farmers' market skills training, designed to support established

and new stallholders. "The farmers' market channel is an important route to market for both start-up food businesses and established producers. It provides a source of direct consumer feedback as well as a revenue stream," notes Willis.

The Bloom Food Market also provides an excellent opportunity for small food and drink companies to build their brand among consumers and to meet with buyers at a trade breakfast. Over 65 food companies participate in the Food Market at the annual Bord Bia event.

Every year a number of organic companies attend BioFach, the world's leading organic trade fair. This show provides organic companies the opportunity to showcase their products and meet with prospective buyers in the industry. Nine Irish companies took part this year in February.

Regarding financial supports, the Bord Bia Marketing Assistance Programme (MAP) is open to companies with a turnover greater than €100,000 and less than €3.5m in the year prior to



Gillian Willis, small business manager, Bord Bia (right) with Minister of State for Food, Forestry and Horticulture Andrew Doyle TD and Margaret Hoctor of Kilmullen Farm



Bord Bia CEO Tara McCarthy with companies participating in the Food Works programme at last year's Marketplace International in the RDS

**"Small food and drink businesses are important contributors to the sustainability and future prosperity of the Irish economy. They underpin the wider local community and the image of Ireland as a provider of high quality, innovative and sustainable food excellence"**

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

Finally, small businesses have the opportunity to receive regular industry updates from Bord Bia in the form of Food Alerts as well as retail and foodservice monthly updates.

## Consumer trends

Small businesses operate in the same space as all other food and drink businesses so they need to be aware of consumer trends. Bord Bia's 2018 Consumer Lifestyle Trends study examines the trends that are shaping people's lives which in turn affects their choices as consumers.

"The major global trends include a shift towards sustainable living with consumers becoming more focused on waste and the environment. They expect environmentally-friendly alternatives with increased pressure being placed on brands to operate ethically and transparently," says Gillian Willis, small business manager, Bord Bia.

"We are also witnessing growing connectivity impacting consumers' choices. As consumers are now 'living in the cloud' more and more, there is a trend towards fluid eating and drinking resulting in the blurring of mealtimes."

The health and wellness trend is also evolving with a growing awareness of the individual components of foods and their potential benefits. The study also found an increasing desire for age-targeted solutions for consumers.

"These trends should be taken into consideration by small businesses when working on new product development," says Willis.

Irish food and drinks businesses can learn more about these global trends by contacting Bord Bia's consumer insights team at [info@bordbia.ie](mailto:info@bordbia.ie). Full details of the study can be found at [www.bordbiaconsumerlifestyletrends.ie](http://www.bordbiaconsumerlifestyletrends.ie)



Members of the team at Airport View Hotel with owners Gerry Butterly and Annie Beggs (far right)

## Room with a view

A hands-on approach and dedication to quality and local produce are behind the popularity of the food and drink offering at Airport View Hotel

**T**he beef served at the Airport View Hotel's Winters Restaurant in Skerries, Co Dublin is 35-day old and dry cured in Himalayan Sea Salt – something which owner Gerry Butterly believes is unique for a restaurant in the Republic of Ireland.

Sourcing fresh fish and seafood locally in Skerries and Balbriggan, Airport View Hotel is also famous for its sizzling prawns and spring rolls, which have been handmade on-site for the past 19 years.

Butterly was originally a tomato grower and farmer and he and his wife Annie Beggs were involved in the nightclub and cocktail bar scene in the area. In 2000, they went about building a 10-bedroom hotel in an empty field. This has since grown to a 30,000 sq ft premises incorporating ten additional bedrooms, a 90-seater restaurant and a spa.

The couple designed everything themselves, right down to the curtains and colours on the walls. Initially, they did all the cooking, but now employ three chefs and 12 other staff. Food is served from 7am to 9.30pm Monday to Friday and from 8.30am to 9.30pm on Saturday and 8.30am to 7pm on Sunday.

"We retain our staff because we work directly with them on a daily basis. I have been doing breakfasts for the past 19 years," says Butterly. "Our food philosophy has always been to have the highest standard ingredients sourced from local suppliers and farmers."

In response to increased tourism in Ireland, Airport View Hotel opened a whiskey room in 2017, which stocks 300 different whiskeys, including the full range from Middleton, Jameson and Teeling. One of its most unusual offerings

is the Ardbeg Galileo, so called because small quantities of this whiskey were sent into space.

Last year the whiskey room was enhanced with a gin selection of 150 different bottles. "We get small parties that want to do group whiskey tastings and lots of Americans and Germans who are interested in trying different whiskeys," says Beggs. "They can pick a whiskey or gin and enjoy it in front of the fire in a nice lounge or go to our outdoor log cabin and smoke cigars."

Despite making a massive investment to expand the business right in the middle of the economic downturn, Airport View Hotel has consistently attracted both local and tourist business.

"We have grown through word of mouth and because of our efforts with our website and social media," notes Butterly. "We recently made a video to promote the business which received 58,000 hits in seven days. The spa brings a lot of people here and once they're here they stay because we have it all."

**"Our food philosophy has always been to have the highest standard ingredients sourced from local suppliers and farmers"**

## No stone unturned

A passion for food and the ability to spot new trends have meant growth and success for specialist artisan ice cream brand Arctic Stone in the space of two years

**W**hile travelling around South East Asia after finishing college, Caolan Cullen came across street food vendors using a technique to make ice cream that he had never seen before. Calling it 'hand-rolled ice cream', he has perfected the technique and turned it into a thriving business, which is now one of the best known ice cream brands in Ireland.

Each serving of Arctic Stone's ice cream is tailor-made from scratch in front of the customer in about 60 seconds. Cullen has worked with chefs to develop recipes, including one of the world's only vegan blends. Arctic Stone can cater for anybody's dietary requirements, including nut allergies and palm-oil intolerance.

Cullen started off with a food stall in Blackrock Market in Dublin in May 2016; then opened a shop in Blackrock with another one due to open in Bray, Co Wicklow in April.

One of the key drivers of Arctic Stone's rising popularity has been its foray into private catering for corporate events. "We work with some of Ireland's biggest companies such as Google, Facebook, and Amazon, which want something different for their private events. This is an important driver for our business off-season in November, December and January," explains Cullen.

"We tailor-make our menu for every client so they receive a bespoke culinary experience."

Examples of this have included ice cream made with a shot of Jameson and ginger and a squeeze of lime and a signature blend made from papaya and mango for a tropical-themed event run by Lidl. One of the reasons a lot of corporate clients like to go with Arctic Stone is its plastic-free ethos. All of the pots and spoons it uses are 100% compostable.

Arctic Stone has also featured at several festivals, including Electric Picnic and The Big Grill BBQ & Craft Beer Festival. "We were the only ice cream vendors at The Big Grill and had queues of 80 people," notes Cullen. "Last summer, we were operating from five locations a day and employing 18-20 staff during peak times." The business currently employs nine people. "Not everyone can do this job as it is quite strenuous and labour intensive and everything is hand-made fresh to order," notes Cullen.

Having qualified with a degree in social science from University College Dublin, Cullen has always been keen to give back to the local community. To date, Arctic Stone has helped to raised €42,000 for LauraLynn Children's Hospice. "My end goal is to empower disadvantaged people, bring them into the business and involve them with the brand," says Cullen.

**"We work with some of Ireland's biggest companies such as Google, Facebook and Amazon, which want something different for their private events"**



Caolan Cullen, founder and owner, Arctic Stone

# Tortilla triumph

Building on its success making authentic Mexican corn tortillas at its facility in Clonmel, Co Tipperary, Blanco Niño plans to launch a new range of premium tortilla chips in supermarkets

It was the pursuit of taco perfection that sent Blanco Niño founder and CEO Philip Martin on a road trip across Mexico, where he discovered the ancient Aztec recipe that gives corn tortillas their unique flavour.

Visiting the milpas, molinos and tortillerias of Mexico, Martin learnt how to make proper corn tortillas like the ones found in the street markets of Oaxaca and Mexico City.

Returning to Ireland in 2014, he launched what ended up being Ireland's most successful crowdfunding campaign at the time. He then brought together a team and found a home for the Blanco Niño tortilleria in Clonmel, Co Tipperary. The company now has a staff of 14 and is working with chefs and restaurateurs across 13 European countries.

Blanco Niño's production process at its 14,000 sq ft facility opened in 2016 is what makes it different, according to Martin. "We make our tortillas and chips using non-genetically modified white and blue sustainably grown corn, water, salt and lime," he explains.

"The corn is cooked, then steeped over 16 hours before grinding it into a dough using hand-carved volcanic stone grinders. This process is called

nixtamalisation, a traditional Mexican technique going back thousands of years. It makes us completely unique in the European market."

Blanco Niño is a member of Origin Green, Ireland's food and drink sustainability programme run by Bord Bia. "We undergo independent accreditation and verification by international auditors to meet the high standards required. This covers everything from how we source our raw materials to our manufacturing and how we treat our employees," says Martin. "This focus on sustainability definitely gives us competitive advantage." The next step for Blanco Niño is a plan to bring real corn tortillas chips into European homes. To this end Martin returned to Mexico to find unique ingredients, flavours and aromas.

"We are working closely with small-scale Mexican farmers who use sustainable, traditional practices, vertically integrating our supply chain from producer to retailer. The flavours are truly innovative and unique and the packaging will be a new paper-style design with a window allowing customers to see the quality and beauty of the chips. This format reflects and communicates the premium position to the consumer."

Blanco Niño has ambitious plans to be the Mexican food brand that defines the premium category on supermarket shelves, adds Martin. "Starting with tortilla chips we aim to disrupt the market with products that offer a truer representation of Mexican food and culture. We hope to launch our chips this summer following a crowdfunding campaign."

**"We are working closely with small-scale Mexican farmers who use sustainable, traditional practices, vertically integrating our supply chain from producer to retailer"**

Blanco Niño is also shortlisted in the Manufacturing and Exporter of the Year categories



Philip Martin, CEO, Blanco Niño

[www.blanco-nino.com](http://www.blanco-nino.com)



Willie Parker, owner-manager of Fenit Fruit & Veg

# Cut to the chase

Fenit Fruit & Veg has tapped into the scarcity of commi chefs and the time pressures of chefs by filling a gap for them with freshly prepared fruit and vegetables just the way they want them

Fifteen years ago, Willie Parker decided to diversify part of his potato growing and farming business near Tralee, Co Kerry to provide prepared and non-prepared fruit and vegetables to the foodservice industry.

This new business line evolved to become Fenit Fruit & Veg. It has grown to such an extent that Parker gave up farming and contracted out the potato supply to a neighbour 12 months ago. Fenit Fruit & Veg's customer base is made up of 150 hotels in counties Kerry, Cork and Limerick, as well as restaurants and even butcher shops.

"We have developed a reputation for working with chefs to develop bespoke, hand-cut products tailored to their specific requirements. In effect we are their commis chefs, using our expertise which saves time and money, reduces waste and allows chefs to focus on the creative side of things," explains Parker. "Each chef could be making the same dish but will have their own input into it using different ingredients. That is where we come in."

Fenit Fruit & Veg currently offers close to 300 different cuts for fruit and vegetables, mostly made with hand guillotines. It also contracted an engineer to design and make specialist equipment for the company, which employs 30 people. The 7,000 sq ft facility Fenit Fruit & Veg operates from is soon to expand to 10,000 sq ft to facilitate expansion.

The types of cuts available include heart-shaped cuts for Valentine's Day and shamrocks for St Patrick's Day. Orders

come in up to midnight on any given day and staff start work at 5.30am to ensure prompt and fresh delivery.

"With some orders we can plan in advance, for example conferences or weddings. One of our orders recently was for 1,100 potato fondants to cater for two weddings. A lot of our output is pre-ordered, but we also cater for restaurants which might ring in looking for standard products," explains Parker.

**"We have developed a reputation for working with chefs to develop bespoke, hand-cut products tailored to their specific requirements"**

Fenit Fruit & Veg is currently embarking on its expansion into retail. Already selling a 1kg bag of peeled potatoes in SuperValu in Co Kerry, it plans to launch bags of freshly cut chips on a wider scale in the coming months. "We want to get onto Bord Bia's Food Academy in association with SuperValu, try to supply West Munster in 2020 and work from there," says Parker.

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



Siobhán Lawless, owner, The Foods of Athenry

## Fully baked

Specialising in supplying ‘free from’ baked goods with a long shelf life was a strategic decision that has paid dividends for The Foods of Athenry

**W**hat started out as a sideline in a converted bike shed to supplement dairy farm income in 1999 has turned into a thriving gluten-free and ‘free-from’ bakery business employing 26 people in rural Galway for Paul and Siobhán Lawless.

Describing herself as “an accidental entrepreneur”, Siobhán began by baking bread, cakes, scones and tarts for local shops and restaurants. By 2004 it became clear the bakery had the potential to make more money than the farm and the couple went about phasing out the milking.

The Foods of Athenry grew organically from 2004 until 2010 supplying clean-label, wheat-baked products throughout Connacht. When the recession hit, Siobhán felt introducing a premium, great tasting gluten-free range would be a way to address it.

Having already converted the milking parlour, Paul extended the operation into the cow house. Siobhán worked on developing products, deciding the best approach was to focus on those with a naturally extended shelf life – hence easier to export.

It was a sensible move as the company now sells into 12 countries outside of Ireland and exports made up 30% of its turnover last year. In the domestic market, it has listings nationwide in all the multiples as well as speciality stores and through foodservice outlets.

A fire at the premises in 2011 forced the couple to close down for nine months, and when they were ready to trade again the landscape had completely changed, says Siobhán. “There was more

competition in the form of new small home bakeries. I saw the future as being in ‘free from’. So, we decided to become specialists in this area.”

The Foods of Athenry gluten-free, dairy-free and/or vegan range is now made up of 30 different individual products, including mince pies, cookies, crackers, cereals and bars; as well as the very popular Cookie Shots resealable bags - resealable packs of tiny biscuits geared towards people who watch what they eat. Each one is only 18 calories. Four extra flavours were added to the range last year – orange, raspberry, cinnamon and chilli brownie.

“We are continually innovating, and have some new exciting products on the cards for 2019. With huge growth in the number of people choosing to eat a plant-based diet, we are well placed to support that dietary choice,” says Siobhán. “Having added extra space to our bakery in 2017 we are ready to grow our exports, and with the challenges of Brexit, we are spreading our wings, and have just signed a deal to bring our products to New Zealand.”

**“With huge growth in the number of people choosing to eat a plant-based diet, we are well placed to support that dietary choice”**

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

## Natural progression

Building on the success of its scientifically formulated super supplements, Revive Active has extended its product range and taken manufacturing in-house

**I**n February, Minister for Business Enterprise and Innovation Heather Humphreys TD officially opened Revive Active’s 10,000 sq ft manufacturing facility in Mullingar, Co Westmeath where the company is making all of its products.

It is the latest development in a busy 12 months for the maker of scientifically developed life enhancing supplements, which was founded in 2010 by Daithí O’Connor. Currently employing 35 people, he plans to take on a further 11 in the near future.

“In 2018 we looked at our brand to see what we were missing. Using an ingredient called Wellmune from Kerry Group, we brought out Junior Revive and Teen Revive, which are focused on bone development, cognitive function and protection,” he explains. These products come in flavourless sachets so can be added to a child’s favourite drink or cereal.

The original Revive Active range was designed for people over 35. “We had kids and older people covered, so the next step was to cater specifically for people in their twenties and up to 35. We wanted to provide a natural alternative to sugar and caffeine.” Director of research and development Daniel Jones got on the case and the result was Zest Active, which was launched in February this year. “Our first batch sold out,” says O’Connor.

In terms of product promotion, Roz Purcell has been an advocate of Revive Active for five years and recently became a full-time ambassador, endorsing the range to her 255,000 Instagram followers. Irish rugby player James Ryan is also an ambassador.

Revive Active products are stocked in about 1,000 outlets across Ireland and

by 50 or so retailers in the UK, as well as being sold online to customers in about 42 different countries. O’Connor thinks Brexit may be an opportunity for the company. “We plan to do an enormous push digitally in the UK. We will continue to keep a contract manufacturer in Wales, because if there is a hard border this will mean we’re still able to supply the UK on a standalone basis from there.”

Last November, O’Connor went to Los Angeles in the US with his head of production Colm Horton to look into production facilities there.

“We are now doing a feasibility study on the US, with a view to launching Zest Active there in the summer. Having a manufacturing base there would mean we could guarantee supply and circumvent the need for FDA approval,” says O’Connor. “The vitamin, mineral and dietary supplement market is set to be worth about US\$30bn in the US, so there is a really big opportunity for quality products.”

**“The vitamin, mineral and dietary supplement market is set to be worth about US\$30bn in the US, so there is a really big opportunity for quality products”**



Daithí O’Connor, founder and managing director, Revive Active

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



# EMBRACING THE ENABLER

The idea that technology is a cost rather than an opportunity is fast being overtaken by a clear understanding of its role in creating successful SMEs, according to Three Ireland

**W**hen it comes to investing in technology, business operations systems and infrastructure improvements continue to be the top priority for Irish SMEs. However, Three's Irish Business Mindset Survey 2018/9 reveals that there has been a notable increase in the percentage of SMEs planning significant investment in improving customers' interactions with their business.

The research shows that 35% of respondents plan to invest to improve customer experience, up from 26% in the previous year. In addition, 86% now have a website (up 15% on 2017) and 9% more are selling online.

"Irish SMEs have forever understood the importance of customer experience. It is the lifeblood of their business to keep customers happy on a personal level. Now, however, they are increasingly looking at how technology can add further value to this," says Pdraig Sheerin, head of SME at Three Ireland.

"The use of technology - for example, opening up social media channels for customers or allowing them to self serve online - is now being seen more as enhancing rather than replacing the customer relationship."

Before any of us make a purchase decision nowadays, we will reach out to several sources before making a decision. This could include family, friends, business networks and online reviews. Small businesses that have incorporated an online community aspect to their brand really see the benefits of this in action. "Your customers are your advocates, and this is particularly powerful online," says Sheerin.

A key finding of the Irish Business Mindset Survey 2018/19 is that the cloud is no longer the preserve of early adopters among SMEs. Only 5% of respondents say they're not making any use of cloud services, down from 15% in 2017.



"The cloud is ever present now. It has become the enabler in the background," says Sheerin. "The fundamental change it has brought is to give small businesses the ability to act and seem much larger. There is no need for equipment on site and they can scale services up and down on a monthly or seasonal basis."

"SME owners used to see technology as a necessary evil and had the attitude of 'I don't know how it works but I don't want it to break'. Now their outlook is all about the benefits and advantages

**"We need to bust the myth that remote working is less efficient or productive. Once you give people the right tools and access to systems, there is no reason for concern"**

it can bring and how it can drive the business forward. Because technology has become so pervasive, it has become increasingly vital to keep security in mind - for example having the ability to wipe devices remotely if they're lost or stolen."

#### Use of the cloud

File storage and sharing (arguably the "entry-level" cloud services) still lead the way in terms of what cloud services SMEs are availing of. But there appears to be a willingness to think beyond these most obvious uses. For example, there has been a 50% increase in the use of cloud-based productivity tools and apps. Those companies using the cloud to facilitate calls and messaging using applications such as Skype and WhatsApp also saw a

50% increase compared with 2017.

Tied in with the cloud trend is the fact that today's SMEs expect seamless connectivity at all times and in all places, making mobile communications key. The number of respondents who say they are essential or important to their business, its productivity and efficiency has risen from 94% to 97% in the survey. In fact, 82% say mobile devices are essential, and that they could not operate without them.

"Mobile devices combined with collaboration tools and cloud services allow people to have a better work-life balance. In the war for talent, every employer has to have a flexible working option," says Sheerin. "We need to bust the myth that remote working is less efficient or productive. Once you give people the right tools and access to systems, there is no reason for concern. The joy smart devices and connectivity has brought is how much can be done in real time. Invoices can be processed in hours rather than days compared to a paper-based system, for example."

In the context of the general discussion around digital transformation at the moment, Sheerin has the following advice for small businesses: "Think about your strategy first - where do you want to go to, your growth ambitions - and place that front and centre. Then look at how technology can be an enabler to help you to achieve those plans. Your digital transformation journey has to align with your business objectives - it is not something to do just for the sake of it."



**Pdraig Sheerin, head of SME, Three Ireland**



Paula Horan, managing director and Andrew Lambe, commercial director, Company Bureau

## Perfectly formed

From its office in a converted 19th Century church in Dublin, Company Bureau saves busy entrepreneurs time and money when they're starting and running a business

Spotting a gap in the Irish market for a streamlined company formation and corporate secretarial service, Paula Horan set up Company Bureau in 1997 to cater for small and mid-sized accountancy and solicitor firms looking to outsource this side of their operations.

Nearly 22 years later, the business has been involved in 30,000 company registrations and has evolved into something of a one-stop-shop for start-ups – as well as providing company secretarial and compliance services to established entities and servicing its original client base.

A commissioner for oaths with a company law background, Horan was joined in 2002 by sales and marketing executive Andrew Lambe, who is now commercial director and joint owner of the business.

Growth has been particularly strong over the past seven or eight years with staff numbers increasing from six in 2011 to a current total of 25. There is a recruitment drive on at present for three additional people.

Based in Dublin 7, the company has around 2,000 customers, including accountants, solicitors, tax advisors, Irish

**“We focus on recruiting educated people who work in an agile, friendly and efficient way. This translates into high levels of customer service and client engagement”**

and international entrepreneurs and overseas professional intermediaries.

Company Bureau has also extended its reach, expanding into the international formations business in 2008. Company registration services are now offered in over 50 countries to new and existing clients, as well as ancillary services such as bank accounts, tax registration and payroll services.

The company has also added to the range of services on offer in the company secretarial department. “For example, we have gained expertise in advanced transactions such as share buybacks, Summary Approval Procedures and Section 343 district court applications to retain lost audit exemption,” says Lambe.

According to Lambe, Company Bureau's success to date is due to a range of factors. These include a strong focus on speed of service and exceeding customer expectations, excellent procedures and standards, as well as the calibre of its people. “We think our staff give us an edge over the competition. We focus on recruiting educated people who work in an agile, friendly and efficient way. This translates into high levels of customer service and client engagement.”

For 2019, Company Bureau will be hoping to capitalise on the increased activity in its sector due to Brexit. “We believe that many Irish companies will be looking to expand internationally this year, which is good for our international formations department,” Lambe says.

The offering will also be expanding further: new services to be rolled out this year include trademark registrations, a website design service for start-ups, and Shareholderagreements.ie, which will provide entrepreneurs with bespoke shareholder agreements.

## Adding to accountancy

Providing accountancy services and more for professional contractors, Contracting Plus is constantly looking at ways to improve its offering



Jimmy Sheehan, commercial director, Contracting Plus

Set up in 2002 to provide accountancy services to independent professional contractors, Contracting Plus has added a range of other aspects to its offering over the years and now works with a customer base of almost 4,000 people in Ireland, the UK, Belgium, Sweden, Poland, the Netherlands, Denmark and India.

The business was set up by current chairman Michael Dineen, who was joined shortly afterwards by now managing director Fergal Lennon. Employing a team of 45 people, Contracting Plus supports independent contractors working in sectors such as IT, pharma, engineering, medical and financial services.

According to commercial director Jimmy Sheehan, the company offers substantially more to its contractors than just accountancy services.

For example, it offers an umbrella company option for contractors, as well as setting up and managing private limited companies for those who want to build financially for the long term. “The service we provide enables independent professional contractors to be up and running as self-employed company directors within a few hours,” Sheehan says.

“Our contractors invariably retain more of what they earn through dedicated and personalised tax planning. Our in-house financial advisors are available year-round to advise on pensions, protection policies, and tax efficient savings and investments.

“And we organise group discount schemes with hundreds of well-known brands, which helps our contractors save money on everything from grocery shopping, nights out and holidays to

insurance and high-street stores.”

Sheehan sees several areas for growth in the short to medium-term, including promoting contracting to parents returning to work and to older people who are not ready to retire. Another area that is gaining traction, he says, is the service of independently auditing and correctly classifying workers as either employees or contractors.

The company relaunched its website at the end of 2018 on the back of user feedback, as well as a tax return portal that allows clients to complete their tax information online.

And there's more to come on the technology front. Having already developed a number of contractor-specific apps and a client portal that allows for easy posting of expenses and time sheets, Contracting Plus is planning to enhance the user experience and functionality of these facilities in 2019.

“We are the only service of our kind with software dedicated to the contractor,” says Sheehan. “Other competitors use off-the-shelf products that don't fully match the requirements of a contractor.”

**“Our in-house financial advisors are available year-round to advise on pensions, protection policies, and tax efficient savings and investments”**



Gillian Free and Jim Dowdall, co-founders and directors of Enviroguide Consulting

## A guiding hand

Enviroguide Consulting takes the worry out of environmental compliance for its clients with its range of services and practical and sustainable solutions

**A** recognition that many companies during the recession didn't have the resources to take on or retain environmental compliance staff was one of the main spurs for setting up Enviroguide Consulting in 2010.

"Companies still had to comply but couldn't afford full-time staff and the fees charged by multinational consultancies were too expensive," explains Enviroguide co-founder and director Gillian Free. "We recognised the need for a broad-based, multi-disciplinary consultancy offering a range of expertise in one place that can provide high quality work and represent added value to our clients."

Another core objective from the outset, she says, was to create employment in an area where jobs were incredibly scarce at the time.

Since 2002, the team has grown from two – Free and fellow co-founder and director Jim Dowdall – to 17. The company operates from a head office in Park West in Dublin 12 and has regional offices in Waterford, Kerry and Cavan.

Enviroguide provides a range of environmental compliance services to public bodies, corporate entities, SMEs and sole traders. Through practical and sustainable solutions, the company aims to help clients achieve environmental compliance, minimise their exposure to environmental risks and liabilities and develop their businesses.

"Private sector companies and public bodies face a raft of environmental legislation," says Free. "Complying

with this is difficult, expensive and often confusing. Our team provides uncomplicated solutions, tailored to our clients' needs. We assist them to minimise their environmental risk, avoid litigation, achieve the necessary consents for their developments and manage their compliance obligations."

Enviroguide's core environmental, planning and waste management services have expanded over the past nine years to include ecological, contaminated land and site investigation services, hydrology and hydrogeology, engineering and surveying.

Looking to the future, Free says Enviroguide is planning to develop its team and expertise in the coming months. It will be focusing in particular on developing its south-east and south-west regional teams to service a growing nationwide client base.

Free also sees the drive towards a circular economy as providing an opportunity to advise clients in the areas of waste minimisation, waste reduction and waste prevention. "We will also be providing advice and guidance to our clients in the areas of end-of-waste and by-product legislation. One of the key mechanisms for promoting a circular economy is the provision of training to our clients at all levels within their structure."

Meanwhile, the ongoing requirement for housing development coupled with complex legislative requirements around planning, environmental and ecological impact assessments is seen as another area of potential growth for the company.

**"Companies still had to comply but couldn't afford full-time staff and the fees charged by multinational consultancies were too expensive"**

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

## Class act

Identifying gaps in the market for work and career-related learning programmes has helped grow FRS Training's business to a nationwide operation that delivered courses to 50,000 people last year

New legislation requiring farmers to be trained up in the safe use of pesticides was the catalyst for FRS Training setting up in 2008. Last year it provided employment and employability-related education programmes to around 50,000 people across the country.

The company is now an accredited course provider with Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), City & Guilds, Lantra (the awarding body for land-based industries) and the Pre-Hospital Emergency Care Centre, as well as Solas, the State body responsible for further education and training in Ireland.

FRS Training currently employs 32 full-time and two part-time staff and operates out of six bases around the country, including its head office in Roscrea, Co Tipperary. "One of our unique selling points has always been that we're a relatively small business, but we're local to our learners nationwide through those six centres," says operations manager Maeve Malone. "Most learners can attend an FRS Training course within an hour of where they live. We are embedded in local towns and communities around Ireland."

According to Malone, the company

**"One of our unique selling points has always been that we're a relatively small business, but we're local to our learners nationwide through our six centres"**

has been strategic in positioning itself to take advantage of new legislative developments, as well as looking at skills gaps in key sectors, such as construction, agriculture and forestry. Construction courses, in particular, have seen big demand in recent years. "There's a huge requirement and we'd see further growth in this area. It's about looking at gaps and filling them."

Malone says being in touch with local communities also sets the direction of the company's programmes. "For example, our people would visit employers to ask them about their needs so we can try to fill those skills gaps."

Of the 50,000 people who did courses with the company last year, Malone says over 4,200 QQI awards and 4,700 Solas Safe Pass tickets were awarded, while 32,000 long-term unemployed people were trained as part of the JobPath programme.

"Our quality approach to training has led to achieving a three-year agreement on the RTC [Responsible Trading Certificate] framework for training provision," she says. "In addition, our commitment to providing employer-led training has resulted in ETB [Education and Training Boards] framework agreements in five regions."

Malone sees the future as exciting for FRS Training. "We're looking at the blended learning platform. We launched a new website in the past year and are looking at new learners coming into the market who want to do smaller bites of training. That might be through a combination of classroom and online training. We hope to expand that out quite quickly and if it works maybe outside Ireland to other areas."



Maeve Malone, Jane Marks and Geradline Carroll of FRS Training

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



**Gerard Kiernan, founder and managing director and Claire Fagan, operations director, Icon Accounting**

## Contractor supporter

A one-stop shop for accountancy, tax and compliance services for independent professional contractors, Icon Accounting is growing fast and extending its reach into various sectors

**A**fter leaving a secure job to start his own accountancy practice in 2007, Gerard Kiernan soon tapped into what he says was a growing trend at the time for IT professionals opting to work on a contract-to-contract basis.

Recognising that a primary – and often challenging – responsibility for such individuals is managing taxes and accounting duties, Kiernan decided to set up Icon Accounting a year later to provide practical advice on setting up and working under umbrella or personal limited companies in Ireland.

“Using bespoke packages, we provide professional contractors with the assurance they need that tax, accounts and compliance requirements are fulfilled, which often seem like the most daunting steps into the world of self-employment,” Kiernan says.

Since 2008, Icon has grown from a one-man operation to a staff of 30 operating out of the company headquarters in Swords, Co Dublin. So far it has worked with over 3,500 contractors. The target market has also expanded – having established itself in the IT space, Kiernan says the company is now experiencing significant growth in several other sectors, including pharma, engineering and life sciences.

The company’s offering goes beyond the traditional remit of an accounting practice, says Kiernan. “We have a dedicated contractor support team on hand to manage the set-up for all contracts, invoicing, Revenue registration and compliance. For those working in Ireland for the first time, we offer help and guidance on how to obtain a PPS number, open a bank account, set up an online Revenue account and hunt for

accommodation.”

Icon also provides a free advisory service to potential contractors on the pros and cons and process of self-employment and contracting. “Through changes in lifestyles, jobs and workplaces, thousands of people around the country are finding contracting works for them,” Kiernan says. “We can help people to decide whether making their professional services available independently is the right option for them.”

He attributes the company’s success to date to its own team. “We have a diverse workforce and the dynamic of our staff has led us to being the fastest growing provider of one-stop-shop accountancy, tax and compliance services for independent professional contractors in Ireland,” he says. “By constantly reinvesting in our staff they have the ability to deliver an outstanding service in a positive and supportive work environment.”

Icon Accounting currently provides its services to over 1,800 contractors and is planning to double this customer base over the next three years, with growth targeted in the pharma, engineering and life sciences sectors, particularly in the Munster region.

**“We have a dedicated contractor support team on hand to manage the set-up for all contracts, invoicing, Revenue registration and compliance”**

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

## Chain reaction

Responding quickly to evolving trends and changing customer requirements has been just what the doctor ordered for Ryan’s Pharmacy chain

**S**ince setting up his first pharmacy in Rathangan, Co Kildare in 1996, Shane Ryan has focused on responding to – and in many cases anticipating – the changing needs of his local customer base. It’s a strategy that’s helped grow the business to five shops across counties Kildare and Offaly and resulted in a product range that includes everything from ceramics and perfumes to clothing and furniture.

The Rathangan shop was the first pharmacy in the town and initial emphasis was very much on the local community’s medicinal needs. Over the next 10 years, as he opened branches in Edenderry, Derrinturn, Rhode and Daingean, Ryan also widened the scope of his offering to include a selection of jewellery, cameras and gifts after securing accounts with Pilgrim, Canon and Newbridge.

During the course of a full business rebrand all five shops were relocated to new units in their respective towns. “We were always keeping a close eye on what was current and when we relocated in 2006 we decided to dedicate a huge amount of space to gifts and homewares,” says Ryan.

It was soon time for a rethink. “The recession brought with it a change in shopping habits and again we moved with what our customers needed from us and replaced giftware with low-cost goods.”

Sourced from the UK, the products were sold at bargain basement prices, according to Ryan. “Our customers loved it and we loved that we knew our target market and what they expected of us.”

When the economy began to recover, it was back to the more premium end of the market and the introduction of brands

like Nicholas Mosse and Max Benjamin, as well as high-end make-up products. “The reaction to them was fantastic,” says Ryan.

Ryan’s is the only pharmacy in Ireland registered with the Design and Craft Council of Ireland. Through this affiliation it stocks at least 10 Irish craft and design brands at any one time.

“Through years of trial and error, we have found our niche and have become an exciting retail store,” says Ryan. “We are conscious that to stand out and compete, we need to be different and bring something fresh to the table. Our stores flow seamlessly from gifts to pharmacy.”

However, it’s not all about products. “I believe our success lies in the value we put on our customers,” Ryan says. “From the beginning to now, our focus has always been on service – how best can we serve our community? This question is what has driven our business and our team and all decisions are based around it.”

**“We are conscious that to stand out and compete, we need to be different and bring something fresh to the table. Our stores flow seamlessly from gifts to pharmacy”**



**Shane Ryan, pharmacy director, Ryan’s Pharmacy**

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



# ACTIVE LISTENER

With deep roots in Irish communities, Permanent TSB takes a personal approach to SME lending and is there to support Irish SMEs concerned about the impact of Brexit on their business and sector

In business now for over 200 years, Permanent TSB is one of Ireland's longest-serving financial service institutions. Since entering the SME lending market in 2015, its focus has been on providing a personal service to small businesses that serve local communities nationwide.

"We offer a personal touch, supported by digital technology," says Patrick Farrell, retail banking director at Permanent TSB. "There's no doubt business has evolved over the past decade, but the principles of providing a personal, quality and efficient service still apply. We have spent many years supporting businesses across the local communities of Ireland, helping them with what they need to succeed."

Permanent TSB also seeks to differentiate its customer value proposition. "We focus on quality, in particular the quality of relationships with our customers," says Farrell. "We have the decision makers in the room when needed. We pride ourselves in getting to know our customers and understanding their needs."

## Be Brexit ready

One such need, which is applicable for any business, is to face the impending impact of Brexit. Farrell advises businesses large and small to be Brexit ready, taking action now to identify and assess the most likely and most significant risks facing their particular operations.

The first step in understanding the risks facing your business is to consider the vulnerability of your industry. "The UK is a significant market for primary agricultural produce and manufactured foodstuffs. Hotels and other hospitality segments often benefit from significant UK custom," he says. "The transportation sector handles many types of goods crossing land, sea or air borders, all of which are vulnerable to some degree from the expected change. Indeed many goods sourced elsewhere may be routed through the UK, creating an indirect vulnerability."

The next step is to consider the specific risk factors that may impact the individual business. These include the level of direct trade with the UK, potential disruption to supply chains, sensitivity to fluctuations in exchange rates and the nature of goods handled - perishable goods are particularly threatened by border delays. "It is even possible that cross-border licensing or qualification may be impacted. Where there is a particular dependence on the UK market, consideration should be given to developing new or alternative markets," notes Farrell.

Farrell also advises businesses to consider how these potential risks might impact business cash flows and what alternative arrangement may be needed from a banking perspective. Permanent

**"There's no doubt business has evolved over the past decade, but the principles of providing a personal, quality and efficient service still apply"**

TSB's field-based consultants, business managers and branch teams nationwide are on hand to help and will be happy to discuss how best to satisfy the banking needs of the business.

All businesses must adapt to changing market conditions and customer preferences. Brexit is the latest in a series of external events that have threatened to destabilise Irish business over recent years. It is important in that context not to lose sight of the positive economic indicators that continue to support economic activity in Ireland, including high employment and foreign direct investment. "Small businesses tend to display particular resilience and innovation when faced with turbulent market conditions," says Farrell.

## Support available

There are many Brexit preparatory supports available to small business owners, including those published by a range of Government departments and agencies. Enterprise Ireland offers a Brexit Scorecard to help assess risks. Local Enterprise Offices offer technical assistance and mentoring. Agencies such as Bord Bia and Fáilte



The Permanent TSB Grafton Street team pictured outside their newly refurbished branch

Ireland offer readiness and response guidance for vulnerable sectors such as food manufacture and hospitality. InterTradeIreland provides cross-border advisory services.

"Here at Permanent TSB we offer a human touch and a willingness to listen, whether your needs are driven by

**"Small businesses tend to display particular resilience and innovation when faced with turbulent market conditions"**

opportunity or threat," says Farrell. "We believe in communities, the people that bond them and the businesses that serve them. The Permanent TSB team focuses on identifying the most suitable lending products to satisfy a customer's financial needs and will guide customers through the application process to increase the chances of a successful outcome."

Permanent TSB offers a range of financial services to business owners through 77 branches nationwide, including lending, savings, investment, financial planning and current accounts.

*Lending products are subject to lending criteria and assessment. Security may be required. Permanent TSB p.l.c. is regulated by the Central Bank of Ireland.*



Patrick Farrell, retail banking director at Permanent TSB



Gerard Joyce and Paul O'Brien, co-founders of CalQRisk

## Play by the rules

Staying on top of regulatory obligations has become a whole lot easier for businesses thanks to the integrated solution developed by CalQRisk

**W**henever new regulations are introduced, there is an almost audible groan from businesses as they add another item to their compliance to-do list. But for some, the ever-increasing array of regulations in recent years has represented a golden opportunity to innovate. CalQRisk is one of these.

"Following the financial crisis, there was a shift from principles-based regulation to rules-based regulation," says CalQRisk's product manager Chris Hanlon. "We developed software that helps manage those rules, saving clients money and time."

The idea for CalQRisk came about when founders Paul O'Brien and Gerard Joyce identified a lack of integrated governance, risk and compliance solutions on the market. While there was software that tackled these piecemeal, there was no catch-all. They came up with just such a product, the need for which was highlighted even more with the advent of the General Data Protection Regulation. Now a range of businesses, from legal firms to county councils, use it to stay on top of their obligations.

Hanlon came on board in early 2012, and the company is now on version 5 of its software, developing a new feature "whenever the market thinks something else is needed".

CalQRisk's clients in Ireland include over 90 credit unions, dozens of insurance brokers, several large local authorities, and institutions such as Limerick Institute of Technology. It also has clients in the UK and US. With a total of 14 staff, CalQRisk opened a London office last year. "There are only so many companies here in Ireland, so despite Brexit the next logical move is the UK,"

says Hanlon.

The most challenging aspect of the business has been the rate of change on the regulations front, with a plethora of new rules introduced in a short space of time across various sectors. By the same token, this is exactly why CalQRisk's service is so valuable; it keeps customers up to date on the lot.

Based in Shannon, 60-70% of CalQRisk's business is in or around Dublin. This distance could be considered less than ideal, but in practice it is fairly easily managed thanks to technology and some smart planning.

"We use tools to do online training, so that rather than driving to Dublin to meet someone for an hour, our clients can do online training sessions. This suits everyone," says Hanlon.

Looking ahead, CalQRisk plans to get more of the public sector on board. It recently won an award for work it did with Cork County Council. Meanwhile, it is close to signing several new partners in the UK which, says Hanlon, would put it in touch with some very large clients.

**"Following the financial crisis, there was a shift from principles-based regulation to rules-based regulation. We developed software that helps manage those rules, saving clients money and time"**

## Waste not, want not

The revolutionary solution developed by NVP Energy substantially reduces wastewater treatment costs while also generating energy



The NVP Energy team winning the Energy Globe Award with Minister Seán Canney (left)

**N**V P Energy's origins can be traced back to NUI Galway's department of biotechnology where the initial idea for a highly energy-efficient commercial wastewater treatment technology was tested. The result was a fine-tuned, effective system whereby – in stark contrast to existing systems – wastewater can be treated using very little energy while simultaneously producing biogas.

"Previously this process was very energy intensive, and would cost huge amounts of both electricity and time," says the company's business development manager Joe Shinkwin.

In contrast, the highly innovative NVP system has very low running costs and the resultant biogas can be used to produce heat and electricity.

While the ordinary consumer doesn't give it much thought, many businesses have to put huge amounts of time, effort and money into dealing with wastewater. Dairy processing plants, for example, produce huge amounts of wastewater that has to be treated before being released. Given that wastewater treatment is not the core business of any of these companies, this is no small task – which is where NVP comes in.

The Galway-based company was formed in 2013, with the next two years spent taking the technology from its laboratory home to full-scale commercial set-ups. The first big break came via ABP Food Group in Northern Ireland. "That was the first commercial site that proved the technology was viable on that scale," says Shinkwin.

The second set-up was with Arrabawn Dairies in Co Galway in 2017. With two major customers happily using

its technology, NVP started to really get noticed. It has since worked with Heineken in the UK on its largest project to date, and there are other UK projects in the pipeline.

According to Shinkwin, the toughest aspect of the journey to date has been getting market traction with a brand new technology.

"Even though it was proven before we went commercial, there is a perception that you need 10 or 15 projects under your belt before some companies will consider you," he says. "But each project we deliver makes this a bit easier."

**"Previously this process was very energy intensive, and would cost huge amounts of both electricity and time"**

NVP's technology is unique and patent-approved in the US and Europe. Its clients are understandably impressed with the savings they make on what was once an onerous task. For example, Arrabawn Dairies was able to double the capacity of its water treatment plant while halving its energy usage – and producing biogas to boot.

The future looks promising; NVP is working to secure several projects in mainland Europe and the US over the next six to 12 months.



Brian Fitzpatrick, co-founder, Oriel Marine Extracts

## Mineral magic

Supported by years of scientific research and globally patented technology, Oriel Marine Extracts has evolved from purely being a sea salt company to one which can offer sea minerals to a wide range of business customers to enhance their products

Oriel Marine Extracts started life as a sea salt company, extracting and harvesting salt from the seawater taken from the bay of Port Oriel, north of Drogheda, Co Louth. Its salt, which has an intense taste profile, goes into products such as crisps and sauces and is used by chefs including Ross Lewis and Ed Cooney.

The proprietary technology Oriel Marine Extracts developed and patented globally extracts the sea water, which is then harvested through an organic and sustainable process certified by Organic Trust and Origin Green. Up to 20,000 litres of water a day is pumped out of the ocean into the high-tech, computerised plant in Clogherhead.

“We need to take the salt out in order to go after the minerals in the sea water – which is what our innovation is all about,” explains Brian Fitzpatrick, who established the company in 2010 with John Delany. “Our magnesium product is in ‘free ion’ liquid form. What makes this special is that this is almost identical to the way it exists inside the human body.”

Oriel Marine Extracts outsources all of its research and development to Dublin City University, which over the past five years has carried out scientific studies proving the benefits of its minerals to the cardiovascular system, respiratory system, neurological system and skin and hair health.

“We knew our minerals would be great from a nutrition point of view, but what we didn’t expect to come out of the research was the impact they have on skin,” says Fitzpatrick. “Skincare and cosmetics companies are putting our

minerals into their products as a magic ingredient. We have also secured some big clients in the wound-care category. The bottom line is that our products make our clients’ products work better.”

As the only company in Europe to be granted ‘Protected Designation of Origin’ status for sea minerals by the European Commission, Oriel Marine Extracts expects to export 60-70% of what it produces this year. Employee numbers are likely to grow from a team of six to at least ten people within a year. “Our growth is going to be more in sales, marketing and research than headcount,” says Fitzpatrick.

While most of its attention will be focused on minerals, interesting developments continue to happen on the sea salt side of the business. “Our salt is going into lots of new things including products made with Irish whiskey and beer and it is also being used to cure salmon.”

**“Our magnesium product is in ‘free ion’ liquid form. What makes this special is that this is almost identical to the way it exists inside the human body.”**

## Clicking into place

From its base in Dundalk, Co Louth, OVVO has come up with a revolutionary new way to join furniture which has the potential to disrupt the global market

OVVO co-founder Sean Phillips had been searching for many years for a product that would take the frustration out of assembling flat-packed furniture. As a manufacturer of high-end bespoke furniture himself, he was looking for something that would simply ‘click’ the pieces into place in a fraction of the time.

When the economic downturn hit in 2008, a drop in demand for his own furniture gave him time and space to focus on his invention. He joined forces with his cousin Brendan Phillips, who’d spent 17 years with Xerox.

“I’d been a senior director and picked up considerable experience in all aspects of engineering, product launches, and sales and marketing, as well as business strategy and team leadership. So when the prototypes were ready we took a stand at a furniture trade show in the RDS, Dublin in order to test the commercial appetite for the product,” Brendan explains.

“The response from manufacturers and distributors was overwhelmingly positive. Having spent two years developing the product and filing the application for the patent, we launched the OVVO Connection System in 2014 at W14, the largest furniture accessory trade show in the UK.”

The OVVO Connection System is a unique solution that allows two pieces of material, mostly furniture, to join together invisibly without the use of tools, glues or screws. As Brendan agrees, it’s a bit like “Lego for furniture”.

“There had been no revolutionary changes in this space for 30 or 40 years,” he notes. “Our products are designed with the needs and wants of people in mind. The process is fundamentally focused on making people’s lives easier by delivering

solutions that have the potential to completely disrupt the market.

“By putting the end-user experience at the heart of our product design process, and working from that starting point, customers are assured that integrating our product into their manufacturing processes will deliver a compelling point of difference for them in the marketplace.”

With a staff of six and a number of awards behind them, the perennial challenge the cousins face is convincing large manufacturers to take the leap with them and this is where the scalable business lies.

“Converting an entire production process is a huge undertaking for any company,” says Brendan. “We need manufacturers to be brave and have the appetite to really disrupt the market – but first they have to be prepared to disrupt their own established processes.”

OVVO has already shipped samples to more than 70 countries worldwide and has begun trading in a number of European markets such as Germany, Belgium, France, Spain, Poland and Eastern Europe.

**“There had been no revolutionary changes in this space for 30 or 40 years. Our products are designed with the needs and wants of people in mind.”**



Brendan Phillips, co-founder and CEO, OVVO

## Following leads

Described by its founder and CEO Liz Fulham as akin to “a marriage broker between businesses and retailers”, SalesOptimize is bridging an important gap in the market

**W**hen businesses miss out on sales leads, they miss out on potentially lucrative deals. And some are doing so on a very large scale indeed.

Data science company SalesOptimize set out to solve this problem. Specialising in market intelligence and sales lead generation, its data – unlike other data providers – is refreshed directly from the internet. Its web-bots scan millions of websites and social media pages every day, extracting valuable contact data which is then converted into sales leads.

As CEO Liz Fulham explains, the innovative service opens up a massive untapped resource for businesses.

“The first big game changer in the sales and marketing industry was Salesforce and its CRM, and then HubSpot nailed it for inbound marketing. The problem for businesses is that only 5% of marketing is inbound, so where’s the other 95%?”

SalesOptimize’s clients include the likes of courier firm DPD Ireland, and Bank of Ireland. For DPD, it identified various retailers that could use its services but hadn’t done so to date.

“For example, Dunnes Stores was on the Buy4Now platform, but wasn’t doing great,” says Fulham. “They got DPD in, and now you can order a product on a Sunday and have it delivered on a Monday by DPD.”

Bank of Ireland, meanwhile, was keen to find more customers for its e-commerce payment product; SalesOptimize helped it do that.

However you frame it, it’s a service that is going down well; although only entering its third year, the company

has hit its first million euro in revenue, and growth is accelerating. Some 95% of its sales are international. Currently employing 15 people, the firm intends to hire a further seven to 10 people over the next two months.

According to Fulham, one of the biggest hurdles has been getting the right technical team to build the product. The company has had to look much further afield than Ireland to do so; only one member of its tech team is Irish.

On the upside, she says, Ireland has a speedy visa approval system. “We got approval for our critical skills visas in less than six weeks, and they came through in less than three months,” she says. “In some countries you would wait twice as long, so that gives Ireland a competitive edge.”

Fulham says the plan is to double the company’s revenue this year, and expand into new markets. There will also be a huge focus on localisation. “I have major clients saying that they love our data, but asking when we will be covering the rest of the non-English speaking world.”

**“The problem for businesses is that only 5% of marketing is inbound, so where’s the other 95%?”**



Liz Fulham, founder and CEO, SalesOptimize

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



Alan Hickey and Sean Murray, co-founders of WeDispatch

## Driving better delivery

Recently rebranded company WeDispatch provides technology which digitises and improves the delivery process for restaurants and retail businesses

**F**ood delivery is big business, yet the vast majority of those in the sector are still scraping by using clunky, paper-based methods to manage deliveries.

It’s a market WeDispatch is tapping into with its innovative software. Having started out as a crowd-sourced, e-commerce delivery company called WeBringg, it now provides delivery companies with software to help them manage their on-demand business.

At the moment, says CEO Sean Murray, of all the takeaways and similar businesses doing deliveries in Ireland, the UK, the US and Australia, only about 5% use software.

“It’s a case of a receipt being printed out and handed to a driver, and then the driver either knows the area or has to search,” he says. “It’s all a bit old school and cumbersome.”

WeDispatch digitises the process. Orders that go through the till come through to its platform from where they are sent to the closest driver’s app. It also neatly covers General Data Protection Regulation requirements, as there are

**“Once the driver leaves, the customer gets an SMS with a link so they can see where the driver is and how long they will be”**

no physical receipts floating around with customers’ details on them. And it keeps the end user happy – no more wondering when your pizza is going to arrive.

“Once the driver leaves, the customer gets an SMS with a link so they can see where the driver is and how long they will be,” says Murray.

This means the business doesn’t have to deal with phone calls, and the weblink is a golden opportunity for marketing to engaged customers.

Murray started the business with Alan Hickey in 2016; at that stage it was a basic system for deliveries. “Over time we added more features, and last year we acquired a company in Australia that had a far better software platform,” he explains.

With 38 employees, WeDispatch has customers in Ireland, the UK, Australia, the US and elsewhere. Its bigger clients include Burger King, Just Eat (and its Australian subsidiary Menulog), and Papa John’s Pizza.

One of the biggest challenges to date has been recruiting the right staff. “This is consistently difficult as we’re up against Goliaths with endless budgets,” says Murray. “We’ve had to come up with creative ways of attracting and retaining the right talent.” So far this has taken the form of a stock option plan, flexible working hours and the subsidisation of up-skilling/college fees etc.

The company is gaining traction in the US and plans to focus heavily on this market. Another item high on the agenda is leveraging its global network of clients.

“If we have a contract with a global company we want to be able to say ‘we have delivery companies in countries x, y and z so you can use their networks to deliver your product’”

**WeDispatch is also shortlisted in the Exporter of the Year category**

[www.wedispach.io](http://www.wedispach.io)

# THE SMART DIRECTION

Energy management is certainly becoming more of a priority amongst small businesses in recent years. This is only set to continue with the advent of smart technologies, according to Bord Gáis Energy

**L**ast year Bord Gáis Energy conducted some research with Irish businesses which highlighted that energy efficiency is a top three priority for the majority of them.

The research found that 55% of small businesses would consider reducing energy usage in order to save money in favour of other cost saving measures. These included supply chain savings (22%), reducing marketing spend (10%); outsourcing staff (9%) and cutting corporate social responsibility programmes (4%).

“Turning a commodity cost such as energy into a value-adding resource has never mattered more, and Irish businesses are becoming more and more proactive in how they are going about this,” says Colin Bebbington, retail director at Bord Gáis Energy. “We are finding that our small business customers are placing operational efficiency, cost-reduction and sustainability at the top of their corporate agendas.”

There have been some exciting developments in the area of smart energy management recently which will drive this trend going forward. Businesses now have access to tools that give them complete visibility of energy usage, right down to individual equipment or device level, at the touch of a button.

“These changes bring inspiring new ways of working to life. This depth of knowledge can lead to increased energy and cost efficiencies, allowing small businesses to optimise operations and processes which can transform their energy footprint,” says Bebbington.

## **Appetite for advancement**

The Bord Gáis Energy research suggests that there is an appetite among Irish businesses for innovative and insightful energy technologies. Companies want to not only stay in control of their energy usage, but also turn their energy footprint into a source of competitive advantage.

Through Centrica Business Solutions, Bord Gáis Energy can now offer new technologies such as Panoramic Power to help small business owners monitor energy usage through a cloud-based solution on a tablet or iPhone. The solution offers real-time visibility with device-level energy data. This can lead to cost reductions and improve operational and business performance.

“We are getting great feedback from customers currently using the system. They are particularly happy with the live reporting and alerts. This allows greater insight into business energy usage and in turn has a huge positive impact on performance efficiencies and predictive maintenance,” says Bebbington.

“Energy efficiency is about small businesses being practical – becoming less energy reliant and more energy resilient. We’re committed to providing



solutions that empower our small business customers to take control of their energy usage.”

## **Practical progress**

Over one quarter of Irish businesses have experienced unscheduled energy failures, according to Bord Gáis Energy. Ageing and poorly-maintained equipment are among the most common causes of energy-related failures. However, maintaining every piece of equipment and machinery so that they remain in peak working order is an inefficient way for a small business to prevent breakdowns.



**Colin Bebbington, retail director at Bord Gáis Energy**

“Energy analytics technology can provide an invaluable granular view into a small business’s energy usage, how it’s supplied and how an energy-related failure would impact on various processes,” Bebbington explains. “The intelligence driven by this kind of data can help optimise performance, deal with potential equipment failures before they happen and thus reduce energy inefficiencies and waste.”

A more efficient approach to how a small business sources, uses and manages energy can drive cost savings that can actually fund growth. In fact, a 20% cut in energy costs can represent the same bottom-line benefit as a 5% increase in sales, according to Carbon Trust in the UK.

Last year’s Bord Gáis Energy research has provided interesting insights into how businesses view energy usage and

**“Turning a commodity cost such as energy into a value-adding resource has never mattered more, and Irish businesses are becoming more and more proactive in how they are going about this”**

energy bills, according to Bebbington. Irish businesses need to be aware of the importance of implementing energy efficiency practices in the workplace both from a commercial and environmental perspective, he notes.

## **Understanding energy**

With this in mind it is no longer enough for Bord Gáis Energy to merely focus on supply. “We are constantly working to develop digital solutions that will help small business customers better understand their energy consumption, thus enabling them to use energy in ways which meet their specific needs,” says Bebbington.

“The real and tangible benefit to smart energy management technology is that small businesses can now be more aware of their energy usage, consume less and in doing so improve their carbon footprint while increasing cost efficiencies.”

Advances in technology, expert advisory services, and flexible financing options mean that energy transformation is now more possible than ever, in his view. In the longer term businesses will look to strengthen brand reputation through sustainable approaches to energy management.

“A sustainable approach to energy does more than improve a small business’s bottom line – it can also improve brand reputation. At a time when consumers are becoming more and more environmentally conscious, this can bring significant advantages when it comes to attracting and retaining customers,” says Bebbington.

“It can also apply to attracting talent; like consumers, employees are more drawn to brands that are seen to be environmentally aware.”



Donal Byrne, managing director, Big Red Barn

## Structural solutions

Having initially spotted a gap in the market for modular structures for events, Big Red Barn has branched out into offering a range of products including affordable homes

**M**anaging director of Big Red Barn Donal Byrne worked his way up in the construction industry until the economic downturn when he turned his attention to large-scale event management and formed EBB Events with two partners.

He went on to become operations manager of the Common Domain at the 2012 London Olympics and during that period was inspired to design the concept of Big Red Barn as an alternative modular event structure. "My motivation was driven by the endless issues experienced with the thousands of tented/marquee structures in the Olympic Park before, during and after the games," he says.

Originally established in 2014 to provide modular structures to the event industry, Big Red Barn has diversified and developed new innovative products each year. Key business relationships have been established with international companies such as Lidl, Skanska and Balfour Beatty (UK) and with event management companies such as Grooveyard and Catapult in Ireland.

As well as servicing events such as the National Ploughing Championships and Electric Picnic, modular structures have also been provided to companies requiring additional warehousing space. Big Red Barn relocated to premises outside Swinford, Co Mayo early in 2018 and this year will see the addition of 15,000 sq ft of manufacturing and office space.

The Modular Home product was launched in 2018 with strong sales since across Ireland and initial sales secured in the UK and US. "We already have unique event structures, including the only modular two-storey event structure available anywhere in the world. We provide a modular chapel called the 'Little White Chapel' that allows couples to marry in their preferred location," says Byrne.

"Our homes are based around a full

insulated steel fabricated framing system and have a unique design and interlocking construction system. They are built to the highest standard, but our design allows us to manufacture affordable homes that are significantly better overall in terms of value for money."

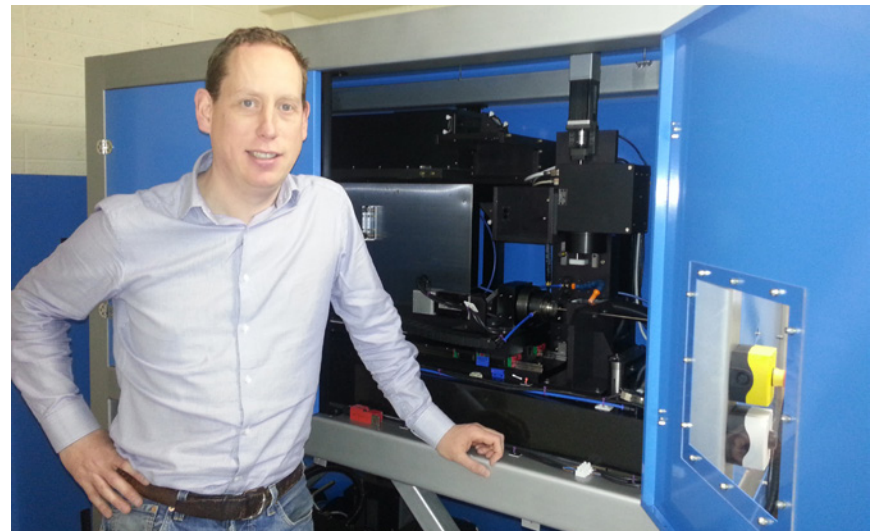
Big Red Barn can supply a variety of internal and external wall finishes that meet all Irish and international building regulations. Its next development will be a two-storey modular home structure. "Based on our experience of the US factory manufactured housing industry, we plan to establish a similar organisation in Ireland to ensure that all factory-built homes are manufactured to an agreed specification and standard," notes Byrne.

Staff numbers at Big Red Barn currently stand at 28 and this is set to increase to 40 over the next three years. "All of our team operate on the principle of 'We don't do problems, only solutions'. This ensures we can offer our customers more than what they need in all situations, whether that is in the event industry or with modular homes," says Byrne.

**"All of our team operate on the principle of 'We don't do problems, only solutions'. This ensures we can offer our customers more than what they need in all situations, whether that is in the event industry or with modular homes"**

## Laser vision

Blueacre Technology's expertise in micromachining along with a strong R&D culture continue to drive its impressive growth trajectory



Dr David Gillen, founder, Blueacre Technology

**F**ounded in 2006 by Dr David Gillen, Blueacre Technology provides specialist laser micromachining to the medical devices and other advanced manufacturing industries.

After completing a PhD in physics, Gillen worked in semi-conductor manufacturing companies. Observing how laser technology was being applied to semi-conductors, he saw an opportunity to apply this technology to medical device manufacturing.

"We supply the global medical device industry, processing thousands of high-value parts daily from our 24/seven facility in Dundalk, Co Louth," he explains. "We machine the smallest of holes and features to precise specifications at industrial scale."

Always at the forefront of innovation, Gillen says that at the moment the company is developing some exciting new capabilities. "Right now we are one of the only companies in the world that can manufacture microneedles. These are the next generation of drug delivery - needles so small that you can't even feel them.

"Researchers around the world are looking at how these can be used to deliver vaccines to children for example, and they are looking to us to help them make the needles to the right specification."

The technology used by Blueacre Technology is highly advanced and specialised, with all of its own machines built in-house. "This means that we can meet a customer's exact needs and also that it is virtually impossible for competitors to copy us," says Gillen. "We

have always prioritised R&D investment as we believe this is what will enable us to grow in global markets. We were part of one of the EU's biggest Horizon 2020 projects, working with partners right across Europe."

In the past two years, the business has focused on providing contract manufacturing for global medical device companies. Turnover has trebled in that time, and the business predicts continued fast growth.

Blueacre Technology was recently awarded a grant under the Government's Disruptive Technologies Innovation Fund and plans to double turnover, profit and staff employed from 15 to 30 in the next two years.

There are always challenges, notes Gillen, as the company keeps pace with the ever-changing needs of its customers. "The market is dominated by large US companies with much larger marketing budgets. We are always striving to improve and offer more to our clients without additional cost. We plan to grow our customer base and work closely with them as they develop new medical devices."

**Blueacre Technology is also shortlisted in the Exporter of the Year category**

**"We have always prioritised R&D investment as we believe this is what will enable us to grow in global markets"**



Founder and CEO of Connexicon Medical Padraig Leamy

## An idea that sticks

Connexicon Medical is making things easier for clinicians and patients in hospital emergency and operating rooms with its innovative alternative to stitching or suturing

**F**ounded in 2014 and based in the Synergy Centre, Institute of Technology, Tallaght in Dublin, Connexicon Medical is a medical device company specialising in the manufacture of tissue adhesives and sealants for topical and internal applications on hospital patients.

The company's flagship product INDERMIL flexifuze is a tissue adhesive which is used for the closure of skin wounds in hospital emergency and operating rooms.

"In layman's terms, we manufacture a medical glue that can be used instead of stitching or suturing, which ultimately saves time for the clinician and improves patient comfort and satisfaction," explains founder and CEO Padraig Leamy.

"The last thing a child in an emergency room wants to see is a sharp needle heading in their direction. With our tissue adhesive the wound can be closed without the requirement for an anaesthetic or stitches. There is also the advantage of reduced scarring to the wound site and preventing infection as the adhesive also acts as a microbial barrier."

**"With our tissue adhesive the wound can be closed without the requirement for an anaesthetic or stitches"**

Leamy says that the company has been very lucky to find great investors in the Irrus syndicate, Dublin Business Innovation Centre and Enterprise Ireland. "Where possible, we've worked with the Enterprise Ireland network to develop potential customers and, together with an excellent product and approachable technical support, more and more contracts have been won," notes Leamy.

Connexicon currently has seven employees and is selling INDERMIL flexifuze into about 40 countries worldwide, covering Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Australia and Africa.

"The vision is for the company to be a specialist world-class wound care provider in the next five to 10 years. Phase one of this is already well underway. Further sales growth will happen in 2019 and 2020 as we expand into new countries in the Asia Pacific region and South America."

Meanwhile, planning for phase two has commenced with the development of new products customised for the US market, which represents about 50% of the tissue adhesive global market.

"Breaking into this market will substantially grow Connexicon's revenues in a short timeframe," says Leamy. "It will allow us to generate organic profit to fund the development of a range of adhesives and sealants to be used inside the body of the patient. Although this class of device carries more regulatory controls, it also allows for a higher profit margin for each device sold, with margins in the region of 80% expected."

Following on from this, Connexicon has a more ambitious plan to participate in the global wound-care market, which was valued at about US\$19bn in 2018, Leamy adds.

Connexicon Medical is also shortlisted in the Exporter of the Year category

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

## Window of opportunity

With a strong focus on research and development, Mahon Windows anticipates increased growth and expansion from its new base in Athlone, Co Westmeath

**F**ounded more than 30 years ago, Mahon Windows is a family-run business that is among the largest manufacturers of energy-efficient windows and doors in Ireland.

Using uPVC and aluminium materials, it provides for both the domestic and commercial markets from the initial consultation/design to the manufacturing of every product in its purpose-built factory in Athlone, Co Westmeath to the on-site installation of the goods. It has a second premises in Birr, Co Offaly.

The team of 25 is made up of several family members and employees who have a diverse range of roles in sales, fitting, installation, manufacturing, accounting and administration.

The company puts particular emphasis on innovation and has a dedicated research and development programme that is overseen by director Trevor Mahon.

"Evidence of the success of this programme can be clearly seen in some of our recent projects, which have covered a vast range of products including toggle glazing, spider glazing and extensive curtain wall systems," he says.

"We have also been involved in the design process of several bespoke products that were used in these recent projects. We thrive on new challenges and feel that continued growth and upskilling is essential to maintain our position as one of the market leaders in the manufacturing of windows and doors."

The installation of new hi-tech machinery has allowed for product diversification and the company has state-of-the-art showrooms where customers can view the product range.

Over the next five years, Mahon Windows plans to grow its business further and increase sales and profits.

"Our recent relocation to Blyry Industrial Estate in Athlone has opened many avenues for continued expansion and gives us easy access to the country's main cities and towns," notes Mahon. "This will allow us to undertake many new projects and expand our target market, which in recent years has moved towards large-scale commercial projects. These have proven to be highly successful and we aim to pursue similar-scale projects going forward."

The company also plans to invest in the most up-to-date technology, which will be achievable with its larger purpose-built premises. "To achieve our anticipated growth, we will be maintaining our current skilled workforce and also attracting new talent to our business in order to meet demands," says Mahon. "At present we are in the process of recruiting administration staff, sales representatives and window installers."

**"To achieve our anticipated growth, we will be maintaining our current skilled workforce and also attracting new talent to our business in order to meet demands"**



Son and father Trevor and Michael Mahon of Mahon Windows

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

# SHINING A LIGHT ON ENERGY

Andrea Carroll, SME programme manager, Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland outlines how the organisation can support SMEs as the economy moves towards more sustainable energy activities

**S**MEs play a vital role in the Irish economy, providing over 90% of national employment and contributing significantly to GDP and export income. While individually SMEs consume only small to moderate amounts of energy, collectively they account for a significant portion of national and indeed global energy demand.

In 2017, 90% of Ireland's energy came from fossil fuels. In the coming years, Ireland must use less energy, move to clean energy, and innovate to create new solutions to meet our energy needs. SEAI is leading the transition to smarter and more sustainable energy activities. We can support you in this transition.

Implementing energy efficiency measures helps SMEs to cut costs, frees up resources that can be invested in more productive activities, and makes them more resilient and competitive. For any businesses interested in considering energy efficiency measures, SEAI offers supports including:

- Financial supports and grants of 30%-40% of the cost of specific energy efficient technologies
- Training and advisory services
- Business events and supports.

### Lighting grant

Lighting is a significant cost for many SMEs, and is the second highest cost for many businesses after staff costs. New developments in lighting technology, particularly light emitting diode (LED) technology, mean that businesses can reduce their lighting bills by up to 60% or more. A Government-funded grant offers up to 30% towards the cost of the upgrade. SEAI will announce details of its latest lighting support scheme this month.

Greaney Glass Products is a family-run, commercial glazing company based in



**“New developments in lighting technology, particularly LED technology, mean that businesses can reduce their lighting bills by up to 60% or more.”**

Galway that availed of the SEAI lighting grant.

Like many Irish businesses, energy costs keep rising, and in 2018 Greaney Glass Products decided to upgrade its lighting. It took a holistic approach and reviewed where lighting was needed. Over 500 fluorescent lamps were

replaced with 250 new LED commercial high-bays. One of the main benefits is better quality illumination for office and warehouse staff. It is a brighter and more pleasant work environment. Good lighting is essential for quality control in the glass produced, and better lighting makes employees' jobs easier. Loading commercial vehicles in the yard is also safer as a result of the new lighting. Greaney Glass Products is saving 60% on its lighting costs every year.

### Top energy saving tips

Saving energy makes business sense for you and contributes to a better, cleaner environment for our future.

- You know your own business – look around, if energy is wasted then so is your profit!
- Get to know your energy bills, talk to your energy supplier and make sure to measure your energy use. If you don't measure you can't manage.
- Attend a short training session on understanding your energy bills from SEAI – In January 2019 one company saved €6,000 on the spot.
- Lower your thermostat by 1 degree to save on heating costs.
- Save up to 30% by setting timers on heating and cooling systems.
- Ensure you properly maintain your heating and cooling systems to keep them working at maximum efficiency.



Andrea Carroll, SME programme manager, SEAI

## Other SEAI Supports for SMEs

### Dairy upgrade scheme

Dairy farmers can avail of support for upgrading milking equipment (including variable speed drives and milk pump technology), which can provide up to 60% energy savings. This grant is open in March 2019.

### SEAI EXEED certified grant

The SEAI EXEED grant scheme is designed for organisations which are planning an energy investment project. The scheme provides grant support of up to €500,000 per year. Projects that implement the EXEED process can save up to 30% in energy use as well as saving on capital expenditure for new investments.

### Training and advisory services

SEAI regularly offers training and advisory services to SMEs, particularly through business networks and other enterprise agencies. For 2019 it is working on more ways to support businesses on their energy journey and to help achieve savings to benefit everyone – through online and offline solutions. We would love to hear your ideas.

To find out more about SEAI supports visit [www.seai.ie](http://www.seai.ie) or register your interest at [business@seai.ie](mailto:business@seai.ie).

- Contact SEAI about availing of an energy audit for your business ([business@seai.ie](mailto:business@seai.ie)).
- Switch off your lights and electrical equipment when not in use.
- Consider availing of a grant to change over to LED lights. Some companies see less than a two-year payback period. Find out more here: <https://www.seai.ie/grants/business-grants/lighting-support-scheme/>



Greaney Glass Products' warehouse





Michael and Carmel Smith, co-founders of M&C Hybrid Energy

## Energising change

Celebrating ten years in business this year, M&C Hybrid Energy has grown to become one of Ireland's leading green, renewable energy solution providers

**B**ack in 2006, with almost 15 years' experience as a plumber in Ireland and the US and a great personal passion for renewable energy, Michael Smith felt the time was right to boost his skills and knowledge in the green arena.

Over the course of the following three years spent researching new technologies across Europe, he became increasingly aware of how Ireland was lagging behind in terms of renewable energy trends and understanding. This led to his decision to launch M&C Hybrid Energy in 2009.

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 and to help them to understand the benefits of doing so.

The business was somewhat ahead of the curve and mass consumer demand at the start, according to Smith. "It's only in the past five years or so that Irish consumers have become more conscious of energy efficiency. This is as a result of a more concerted effort from Government and the growing understanding of the real risks of climate change," he explains.

"Now, our business is growing exponentially and we expect that to continue throughout 2019 and beyond."

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

"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 its local

Sustainable Energy Community (SEC) to identify where cost effective solutions can be rolled out in community halls and schools to bring about energy savings. "We helped to achieve a grant for a local hall a few months ago. It meant they were able to change all the old inefficient lighting to LED lighting fixtures, insulate the whole building and replace all the old windows with new triple-glazed windows."

Smith believes the company's success to date is due to consistently reacting to changes in the industry – whether it's new legislation or technologies – to ensure it delivers first class, state-of-the-art solutions.

"We listen to the needs of our customers intently. We use the information provided by our customers to better adapt to their needs and bridge the gap between Ireland becoming more green and potential customers responding positively to that aim," says Smith. "We are passionate and believe entirely in the future of green energy and really want to see Ireland become a leader in this area."

**"We use the information provided by our customers to better adapt to their needs and bridge the gap between Ireland becoming more green and potential customers responding positively to that aim"**

## Taking the high road

Reducing carbon emissions is high on the agenda for M50 Concession, a company focused on ensuring Ireland's busiest motorway is open and safe

**A** public-private partnership company awarded a 35-year contract in 2007 to operate and maintain Dublin's M50 motorway, M50 Concession is responsible for all aspects of keeping the road moving. This includes traffic management, upkeep of surfaces, street lighting, safety barriers and fences, as well as everything from grass cutting to litter picking.

The company, which employs 28 people, also provides 24/seven emergency response, comprising an incident support unit and a number of recovery vehicles to help keep traffic free flowing.

"We are currently experiencing over 400,000 individual journeys every day and ensuring the M50 is open and safe for road users is our top priority," says M50 Concession general manager Borja Santamaria. "To achieve this, we carry out all of our functions to the highest standard."

According to Santamaria, sustainability is the cornerstone of the current company strategy. The Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP), which M50 Concession joined in 2014, is being used as the main driver to manage this. "In order to achieve our climate change targets we have been implementing a number of energy efficiency programmes during the past few years and are currently working on new actions," he says.

The most significant scheme to date has been a streetlight dimming project, which has resulted in a 43% reduction in energy consumption. Before implementation in 2017, over 4,000 high wattage lamps along the road were consuming 7GWh per year and accounted for 82% of the company's carbon footprint. The project involved installing power control units at each of the 106 electricity supply points on the motorway. This reduces the output voltage to the lights during the night in accordance with relevant lighting standards when traffic volumes are low.

"The project has gone somewhat under the radar since its implementation as the dimming effect on the lights is barely noticeable to the naked eye," Santamaria says. "This was the real beauty of the project for us: we reduced our streetlighting electricity consumption by 3GWh without our road users even noticing."

Other projects that have been implemented include upgrading lighting in the M50 Concession offices to LED. The dry salt gritting process used during winter maintenance was also changed to a pre-wet system. This uses 16% less salt, thus reducing CO2 emissions and pollution.

Major road resurfacing works due to start this year will have a sustainability element. "We are exploring the use of low-carbon alternatives such as the introduction to Ireland of rubber additive pavements which use recycled car tyres," says Santamaria. "A trial section has already been installed in the M50 to test the solution."

**"In order to achieve our climate change targets we have been implementing a number of energy efficiency programmes during the past few years and are currently working on new actions"**



Borja Santamaria, general manager and Sean Hollywood, technical engineer, M50 Concession

## Future proofing

Products and processes are at the heart of Cavan-based Kore Insulation's commitment to sustainability and the environment

**A** focus on the future and ensuring that its energy-saving products are meeting the building regulations of today – and will continue to do so for many years to come – are key components of Kore Insulation's strategy for growth and innovation.

Kore was set up in Kilnaleck, Co Cavan in 1997 after founders – husband-and-wife team Thomas and Helen Brady and their friend Jimmy Macken – saw a gap in the Irish market for high-quality and long-lasting EPS (expanded polystyrene) insulation products.

Initially manufacturing EPS for floor insulation, the company added wall and roof applications to the mix within two years. The suite of products has since been expanded again to include cavity wall insulation and an insulated foundation system, as well as some non-insulation applications for use in the packaging, civil engineering, marine and art and design sectors.

Marketed to construction industry professionals and self-builders, the insulation products – all of which are Part L 2018 and nZEB (nearly zero energy building) ready – are used in new-build and retrofit projects, both domestic and commercial.

Strong growth in the past five years has seen Kore's staff numbers increase from 17 to 46. Recent years have also seen a change in leadership, with the business now being run by Thomas and Helen's son Noel Brady as managing director, commercial director Caroline Ashe Brady and Pauric Kavanagh, who was appointed operations director last year.

In addition to its product offering, Kore is committed to sustainability and the environment in the way it does business. The company is certified to ISO 14001: Environmental Management Systems and was the first in Ireland to achieve the latest revision.

A number of measures and policies have

been implemented at its own premises, including lean manufacturing, LED lighting upgrades, a heat pump for office space heating, a high-efficiency boiler for the manufacturing process, EcoDrive training for all drivers and insulation upgrades.

"We've reduced our waste by 50% by diverting it back into the manufacturing process and various recycling programmes, and have implemented water savings that amounted to over 1.3m litres of water savings in 2018 alone," says Ashe Brady.

The company is also aware of its responsibility towards the local community, she says, and participates in the SEAI's Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme, the Better Energy Communities Scheme and the new Deep Retrofit Pilot Programme.

"Between our upgrades at the factory and office and our participation in these schemes we've saved the local community over 2.5m kWh in energy savings over the past 18 months. We will continue with our participation in 2019 and beyond," Ashe Brady says.

**"We've reduced our waste by 50% by diverting it back into the manufacturing process and various recycling programmes, and have implemented water savings that amounted to over 1.3m litres of water savings in 2018 alone"**



**Pauric Kavanagh, operations director, Caroline Ashe Brady, commercial director and Noel Brady, managing director, Kore Insulation**

[www.kore-system.com](http://www.kore-system.com)



**Roseanne Donegan, owner, Monasterboice Inn**

## Stream of energy

A major expansion two years ago was the catalyst for Monasterboice Inn to embark on a range of renewable energy and energy efficient initiatives

**A** favourite stop-off point between Belfast and Dublin, Monasterboice Inn in Drogheda, Co Louth placed an increased emphasis on sustainable energy in 2017 while building its new conference centre.

"During the works it was necessary to redirect our stream. So, while doing this we decided to harness it for aquatherm energy to provide heating in winter and cooling in summer," explains owner of Monasterboice Inn Roseanne Donegan. "We then replaced our gas-fired boilers with heat pumps."

The business has an intelligent system from EuroSmart, which determines the most efficient method of heating or cooling on a given day – depending on ambient temperature and business demands. "We also capture the hot air from our kitchen extractor fans and

use it to heat our water. In addition, we designed the new building to take advantage of sunlight and then installed LED lighting as well as superior insulation throughout," notes Donegan.

Originally a coach house where horses were changed, Monasterboice Inn has been in the Donegan family for over 200 years. It is rich in history and forms the cornerstone of the Monasterboice Heritage Trail. At the time of the Battle of the Boyne, it was the home of Thomas, brother of General Patrick Sarsfield.

Over the years, Monasterboice Inn has expanded to incorporate a 150-seater restaurant famed for its steak and scampi with the conference centre catering for 350 people theatre-style, or 200 for dining. With every development it has strived to retain much of the character of the past but will all the comforts of modern living.

"As the M1 was being upgraded, we started serving food to the men working on the road. Food service made its way into the private house, eventually taking it over, and has been growing ever since," says Donegan. "We employ 79 people, a lot of whom are part-time to cover weekends and functions."

When it comes to sustainable energy, Donegan feels Monasterboice Inn's efforts are special because although it extended its building by 41% and increased the business, it succeeded in reducing its overall energy use by 1.3%.

"It is important for every business to be environmentally aware. With global warming causing catastrophic climate change, we all need to reduce our carbon emissions and using renewable energy is vital," she says.

**"During the works it was necessary to redirect our stream. So, while doing this we decided to harness it for aquatherm energy to provide heating in winter and cooling in summer."**

[www.monasterboice-inn.ie](http://www.monasterboice-inn.ie)

# DIGITAL DISCONNECT

Irish SMEs are good at communicating with their customers online and have made their websites mobile optimised, but they need to do more in terms of functionality and e-commerce

**T**wo thirds of Irish consumers would buy more from their local shops if these shops had some form of click-and-collect service, which would allow them to order a product online and pick it up in-store.

This is a compelling finding from the IE Domain Registry's (IEDR) Digital Trends in Ireland 2018 survey, highlighting the need for SMEs to up their game in terms of keeping pace with what consumers want.

"During the week particularly people are looking for convenience and the ability to rush into a store and pick up what they ordered online," says David Curtin, chief executive, IEDR. "At weekends, people want the experience of shopping and are more likely to spend time browsing in a physical store."

In tandem with such habits, Irish people are buying more and more goods and services online. The research shows that 63% of Irish citizens buy consumer items such as clothes and electronics online at least once a month. Nearly half (49%) order food online at least monthly.

It is an opportunity being missed by Irish businesses. The majority (68%) of Irish consumers believe their local main street is not equipped for the digital age. When asked why, 40% said their local shops are not online and 22% said that booking appointments or reservations online was not a priority for their local community.

In total, 46% of people can't book appointments online for services in their local town. This figure drops to 33% in Dublin, but rises to more than half (51%) in areas outside the capital. In areas outside Dublin, 19% of respondents said their local town's Internet quality was too poor to facilitate e-commerce.

"So many SMEs have premises that are in a fixed location which doesn't have high-speed broadband. The announcements by Imagine and Eir



recently have made regional broadband very topical and interesting," says Curtin. "The National Broadband Strategy has to prioritise towns and villages to serve SMEs and small businesses. Consumers seem to be finding a way to access high speed broadband; they will go to where the WiFi is good. But business owners can't really do that."

### Digital Skills Assessment

In the IEDR's latest SME Digital Health Index it introduced a new approach to analysing SMEs' digital skills. The Digital Skills Assessment framework awards an overall grade for SMEs' ability to communicate with their customers online, facilitate transactions and enhance or 'boost' their online presence. "Previous studies showed that small business owners didn't know where to start in relation to their online presence. There was a fear of starting in the wrong place or making the wrong decisions. So we decided to ask SMEs about their own digital skills," says Curtin. "The findings were very interesting. They showed that business owners are pretty good at communicating online, but not great for transacting."

Only one third of the SMEs surveyed achieved an A or B grade for transacting online and less than two in 10 SMEs are boosting their online presence. "These grades demonstrate that SMEs need assistance in getting digitally up-skilled in order to compete in the global marketplace," notes Curtin.

The SME Digital Health Index shows that more SMEs have websites than ever

**"During the week particularly people are looking for convenience and the ability to rush into a store and pick up what they ordered online"**

before (72%). Crucially, almost three-quarters of these websites are optimised for smartphone viewing. "When Google decided to change its algorithms so that companies would be lower on a search list if not mobile optimised, this was the prompt businesses needed," says Curtin. "Most early inquiries are made from mobile devices. Consumers demand a

positive user experience that is in line with their browsing habits."

However, just three in 10 SMEs can take sales orders through their websites, despite e-commerce spend being worth €12.3bn a year. "SMEs need to respond urgently. Consumers will shop with rival businesses or foreign retailers to find the goods they want," warns Curtin.



David Curtin, chief executive, IE Domain Registry

## Record-breaking year

In 2018, 51,040 new .ie domains were registered, representing an increase of 29% compared with 2017. The total .ie domain database recorded 262,140 active domains at the end of 2018, up 10% on the previous year.

The large year-on-year growth is due to the registration rule change implemented in March last year. It is now easier and faster to register a .ie domain. Applicants only need to provide one document to prove identity and a connection to Ireland. This ensures the .ie namespace remains authentically Irish. Returning customers don't need to re-submit any documents and can avail of a new 'FastPass' system.

# PROBLEMS SOLVED

The five winners of the Emerging New Business category in this year's SFA National Small Business Awards care about what their customers really need and are being innovative in delivering on that

## GET THE SHIFTS

Based in Shannon, Co Clare, Get the Shifts matches temporary hospitality workers with relevant employers across Ireland using an on-demand web and mobile platform.

The start-up's disruptive technology helps clients not only in the sourcing of staff, but also in the managing of those they hire. A business can browse through about 600 trained, pre-screened Get the Shifts employees (known as Superstars) and offer a shift from an app on their phone. Superstars accept the shifts they want up to three hours beforehand and check in and out through GPS.

Hannah Wrixon founded the company in 2016 further to spotting the need for such a service while working in the hospitality sector. "Effective staffing is a historic problem for hospitality businesses, from trying to forecast the right number of staff on any given day to combating no-show employees and talent shortages. The reality is that businesses are in constant need of reliable, trained staff," she says.

**"Since starting out, what we are consistently tapping into is the trend of socialising around exercise. And so we came up with the brand idea 'Make Life Richer'"**

Everyone with a profile on the Get the Shifts platform has gone through a recruitment procedure and bespoke training programme. In addition, the Superstars have the opportunity to up-skill by availing of e-learning programmes provided by Waterford-based company Dulann at about 10% of the standard cost.

Get the Shifts is on track to secure 60% of the casual hospitality market in Ireland, further to filling over 1,500 roles since it was founded. It services hotels and bars throughout the country, but most of its activity is in Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Galway. Its clients include Aviva Stadium, Thomond Park, Workers Beer Company, Aiken Promotions, The Right Catering Company and Dynamic Events.

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

## GYM + COFFEE

Friends Diarmuid McSweeney, Niall Horgan and Karl Swaine decided to start an online business together in Dublin in 2017 after identifying different lifestyle trends while living in Australia and the US.

"We are first and foremost a predominantly online, Irish-designed and owned athleisure wear company. Athleisure wear is a category of clothing that can be worn anywhere from the office to the gym and when going for a coffee," says McSweeney. "Since starting out, what we are consistently tapping into is the trend of socialising around exercise. And so we came up with the brand idea 'Make Life Richer'. The clothing is now one element of an overall concept."

In practice, this translates into Gym + Coffee having built an online community



Niall Horgan, Diarmuid McSweeney and Karl Swaine, co-founders of Gym + Coffee

of 45,000 people and each year running about 24 free exercise events. "These could be a morning run, a yoga class, just everyday healthy activities. People come together around those activities. We are looking at doing bigger adventures too from now on," says McSweeney.

The Gym + Coffee team has designed all of the clothing and manufacturing is outsourced to partners in China and Singapore. Last summer, an opportunity arose to have a pop-up store in Dundrum Shopping Centre for two weeks. This has since become a permanent outlet.

"We found that we acquired a lot of new customers and there was no cannibalisation of our online sales," says McSweeney. "We are proud of our products. The athleisure category is booming and will continue to globally for

the next few years."

In the longer term, McSweeney sees an opportunity to use the Gym + Coffee platform and brand for various things connected with its message, including possibly through collaboration with other companies.

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

## PEACHY LEAN

Sharon Keegan has designed special leggings that offer support to women, inspired by her own need to look and feel good in the gym after having a baby and suffering post-natal depression in 2015. Having previously run a food business called Pieminister, Keegan went to University College Dublin to study



Hannah Wrixon, founder, Get the Shifts



Sharon Keegan, founder, Peachy Lean

# EMERGING NEW BUSINESS



Rachel O'Donnell, founder, The Ux Studio

**“I wanted to create something that was made of high quality material but was soft enough so you can bend and work out while wearing them”**

innovation and product design to set her on the right path.

“I wanted to create something that was made of high quality material but was soft enough so you can bend and work out while wearing them. The leggings are like a combination of tights and Spanx – soft like tights, but with enough hold to give you a streamlined shape,” she explains.

Now women of all shapes and sizes, including celebrities such as Vogue Williams, are backing the brand with its distinctive heart shape on the bum. Within a year, Peachy Lean has built up 14,000 followers on Instagram and sold around 4,000 units in Ireland and 24 other countries. Keegan works from her kitchen table and outsources the manufacturing to China.

The community aspect of the brand has been central to its popularity. A campaign called ‘I am Peachy Lean’ called out to women on Instagram to get involved in a photo shoot. Nearly 650 women registered their interest and Keegan decided to turn it into an event at the DCU Ryan Academy in Citywest, Dublin.

“We took women in groups of ten into a room and asked them to tell their stories as well as put compliments on stickers on each other. Twelve winners were picked for their unique stories and are now brand

ambassadors.” One of these is Trisha Lewis, who lost 100lb in a year and was on The Late Late Show in January.

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

## THE UX STUDIO

Established in Galway two years ago by Rachel O'Donnell, The UX Studio specialises in building digital products and interfaces by focusing on both user needs and the business objectives of its clients.

“Instead of sitting at a boardroom table deciding what end users want, we ask them directly and involve them throughout the process,” O'Donnell explains.

One of The UX Studio's key projects to date which illustrates this has been with med-tech multinational Medtronic. In the clean rooms at its Galway facility, there are multiple machines with different interfaces. “Having numerous

interfaces from different vendors was not intuitive to the users' needs. This was getting in the way of Medtronic's two core goals – that of reducing downtime and maintaining quality,” says O'Donnell. “We spoke to operators, engineers, R&D people as well as maintenance staff actually doing the job on a day-to-day basis and defined a set of requirements.”

The team highlighted to Medtronic management that they needed to consider colour blindness, for example, and got around this problem by using icons and words instead of colours.

The UX Studio's proof of concept with Medtronic has led to referrals in the med-tech sector. Now employing seven people, it also works with SMEs in Dublin, helping them with e-commerce solutions. “We don't design run-of-the-mill standard websites; it is more about functionality,” says O'Donnell.

“An auctioneering firm came to us saying they wanted a website, but we asked them to tell us about their business

and the problems they had. One was the fact they didn't have time to upload property listings on different platforms. We looked at how their users want to absorb information and found they had a short attention span and preferred to watch rather than read. The solution we came up with allows the firm to upload photos and a video for each property on multiple platforms.”

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

## ZARRDIA

With over 20 years' experience between them working in IT companies, Finn Killeen and Martin Davis set up Zarrdia in 2016 because they are “fundamentally passionate about helping people”, according to Killeen.

“What we found was that the IT industry is predicated on sales vendors and the agendas of the larger vendors in the world which provide software and hardware. We felt there was nobody sitting on the side of the customer in these conversations,” he says.

“We can sit with a customer and help them to make very strategic and tactical IT decisions, whether it is in relation to the management of their existing IT legacy estate, moving into the Devops and cloud native environments or a hybrid solution thereof.”

**“We already have 11 major clients who can see we are helping them to make decisions that aren't based on our own sales agendas”**

The backbone of Zarrdia's business is to focus on areas that will give clients the most competitive advantage and how to use IT to enable that. “Technology is changing at such a pace and we're the worst industry in the world for following buzzwords. We call it ambulance chasing when customers feel scared to spend money on different types of solutions,” says Killeen.

“This is wrong because every business is at a different maturity level. For some it is the right decision to leave the IT estate they have as it is, while others should jump at new technologies.

“What we try to do is develop small pieces of work to demonstrate what we're about. From there, things have snowballed. A ten-day piece of work becomes an 80-day engagement, for example. We already have 11 major clients who can see we are helping them to make decisions that aren't based on our own sales agendas.”

Zarrdia generated over €1.5m in revenues in its first full year (2018). It employs 11 people and also uses up to 30 contractors on a flexible basis when required.

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



Finn Killeen and Martin Davis, co-founders of Zarrdia

# PATHWAY TO EXPORTING

At a time when a lot of questions are being asked about selling into the UK, Enterprise Ireland is providing practical support to Irish companies that want to explore new markets for their products and services

**A** new workshop series of seven masterclasses from Enterprise Ireland called Essentials of Exporting kicked off in February as part of the agency's range of supports to Irish businesses keen to scale up internationally.

Run in partnership with the Local Enterprise Office network, Essentials of Exporting is aimed at unearthing the latent potential that could drive even greater exporting success.

"These half-day masterclasses will help companies to identify the steps involved in becoming export-ready and will equip them with the necessary skills to evaluate and identify potential market opportunities for their products and services," explains Fergus McMahon, head of exporter development, Enterprise Ireland.

"Participating firms will hear from existing exporters and meet with the Enterprise Ireland exporter development team who will assist them to shape their export proposition, ensuring that they have a clear understanding of the actions to take.

"These are not general, informational events. They are active workshops during which participants work on their own business, using tools to help them make informed decisions about export potential."

Formed in 2011, the Exporter Development Department in Enterprise

## Support on the exporting journey

Enterprise Ireland works with Ireland's most ambitious entrepreneurs and businesses to help them scale and reach new export markets. Whether it's funding, market insight or access to an international network, it has the supports to help companies to achieve their global ambition. These include:

- Prepare to Export Scorecard – allows potential exporters to test their readiness
- EILearn.ie – an online learning portal for SMEs on an exporting journey
- Essentials of Exporting workshops (being held in six locations around Ireland until November 2019)
- Market Discovery Fund – funding to validate your go-to market plan
- Agile Innovation – support to get your product export-ready
- Operational Excellence – support for established companies (SME and large) to address their competitive challenges and growth opportunities through a transformation project.
- A national network of nine regional offices throughout Ireland and over 30 international locations, facilitating access to more than 60 countries worldwide.



Ireland actively supports between 150 and 200 companies a year on a one-to-one basis and through larger group and national events. These companies range in size from 10 employees right up to 100.

"Our mission is to work with companies which are domestically focused and try to get them to look at exporting. We give them a pathway on that journey," says McMahon. "A lot of Irish companies are supplying multinationals to a very high

standard in Ireland, for example in the building of data centres. Others have fantastic skills and products that are very exportable. For all types of businesses, we guide them on the best place to start, understanding whether exporting is right for them and how their product or service can compete on an international stage."

### Interest in new markets

As an island nation with a dynamic open economy, Ireland enjoys exporting success around the world. That success is growing, with more than 215,000 people now employed by Enterprise Ireland – a record high.

Brexit has raised awareness of the implications of exporting among Irish SMEs. Those which might be exporting to the UK in a small way are increasingly looking at what diversifying beyond this market might entail.

"We have seen a lot of interest in this. Successful domestic companies which have developed good IT solutions, processes or services are looking at whether they can market them elsewhere," says McMahon. "The domestic economy has topped out for them and their only way to grow is by exporting."

Companies considering exporting for the first time face a number of challenges, which Enterprise Ireland can help them with. McMahon has the following advice: "The first thing is to validate your product or service in the market you're targeting

**"Participating firms will hear from existing exporters and meet with the Enterprise Ireland exporter development team who will assist them to shape their export proposition, ensuring that they have a clear understanding of the actions to take"**

and ensure you have proper funding to see that through. You need to commit sufficient time to grow in a market – once you have established through market research that it is the right fit for your business. Choosing the right route to market is a big challenge. Sometimes it is best to go direct into a market, while in other cases a distributor or partner is needed."



**Fergus McMahon, head of exporter development, Enterprise Ireland**

## Health kick

With a vision of becoming the world's most loved and trusted health food brand, Good4U has expanded beyond the UK and Ireland in recent years to service other European markets

**A**n introduction to the sprouting phenomenon compelled managing director of family business Good4U Bernie Butler to learn more about these superfoods. On the back of published research from the University of Ulster on the inherent cancer-protective compounds found in a bespoke mix of sprouted seeds, Good4U was ready to launch its hero product Super Sprouts in 2004.

"We were first to market with this exciting new health food and are now market leaders in this space in the UK and Ireland," says Butler. Good4U sprouted seeds and pulses can be found in the produce section of most retailers including Tesco, Sainsbury's, Waitrose, Ocado and Supervalu.

Four members of the Butler family are involved in the business, each bringing unique skills and expertise to the table. Bernie and her husband Paul Butler's daughter Laura is the sales and marketing director while another daughter Michelle is a registered dietician and head of product development. Son Karol is the financial controller.

Sligo is the company headquarters and home to an ever-expanding healthy snack and ingredient portfolio. This includes Roasted Seed Pots and Doy Bags, Super Shots, Veggie Protein Shots/Trays, Adult Energy & Protein Balls and Kids Nutri Balls – many of which have received both national and international awards. Employing a total of 48 people, Good4U also has a dedicated sprouted seed facility in Cookstown, Co Tyrone.

"Making health foods and snacks that are honest, tasty and functional are the prerequisites that ensure product integrity remains at the heart of everything we do," says Butler. "Continuous innovation is key. The product development and marketing team are constantly challenging themselves to meet the shifting demands

**"We now export 90% of goods to seven international markets with several new markets in the pipeline by 2020"**



**Karol Butler, Michelle Butler, Laura O'Sullivan and Bernie Butler of Good4U**

and trends of a dynamic and exploding market."

Having invested in factory expansion and technological advancements in 2018, Good4U is poised to leverage this with an array of product innovations while always maintaining its strict product credentials: 100% natural, no added sugar, plant-based and functional.

A dedicated team of nutritionists and dieticians share expert advice on Good4U's website and social media channels to enable people to make better food and lifestyle choices. These professionals also offer nutrition services to sports teams, schools and corporate businesses.

"Good4U is revolutionising the health food and snacking space with a no compromise approach," says Butler. "We now export 90% of goods to seven international markets with several new markets in the pipeline by 2020. Our mission is simple: to empower people of all ages to live a healthier life by making healthy eating accessible to everyone."



**Andrew Flood, CEO, Prodigy Learning**

## Rising edtech star

As well as building on existing operations in Ireland, the UK and Europe, 2018 was Prodigy Learning's first year of trading in the Asia-Pacific region

**S**et up in 2000, Prodigy Learning is an education technology (edtech) company that provides digital skills certifications and learning solutions for some of the largest technology companies in the world, including Microsoft, Adobe, EC-Council and Autodesk.

The company has about 3,000 customers in the education, training, corporate and public sectors in Ireland, the UK, Europe and now the Asia Pacific region. It employs 20 full-time staff across its three offices in Dublin, London and Sydney.

High profile customers to date have included the NHS, London School of Economics and University of St Andrews in the UK, Solas and the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) in Ireland, and TAFE (Technical and Further Education) New South Wales in Australia.

Exports currently represent over 70% of the business and are the key driver of growth for the company.

CEO Andrew Flood says that despite the political and economic uncertainty within the UK market, the company is continuing to experience accelerated growth there. "We have continued to invest in the UK based on current levels of activity and the overall level of opportunity," he says. "We expect UK revenues to quadruple by 2021 through increasing our market share and establishing more local awarding organisation partnerships."

Prodigy branched into mainland Europe in 2016 and plans to continue to grow its presence there. "In December 2018 we secured a strategic agreement to further embed and expand our European operations which we aim to do through channel and direct business," says Flood.

Initial achievements in Australia have exceeded expectations, with the

company launching the Microsoft Australia National Skills Program in February 2018, delivering a project to retain ex-automotive workers in South Australia. A second programme aligning curriculums and embedding digital skills certifications in a National Cloud Traineeship alongside Microsoft Australia and TAFE NSW was announced in November 2018.

**"We expect UK revenues to quadruple by 2021 through increasing our market share and establishing more local awarding organisation partnerships"**

In addition to geographic expansion, the company launched 'Coding in Minecraft' – the world's first computer science credentials delivered through Minecraft for primary school children. It aims to develop coding skills alongside Microsoft and London Grid for Learning in the UK in April 2018.

"A key aspect to our global footprint has always been to allow the company to launch new products across multiple regions while using our Dublin base to drive operational synergies across the group. We are in conversations in multiple other geographies where we are experiencing demand for our latest edtech products and platform," says Flood.

Going forward, as well as continuing to expand its reach, Prodigy intends to build out a wider range of assessment and learning-as-a-service product offerings.

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

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

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

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



**SFA**

Small Firms Association