

Irish Independent 



SFA National Small Business Awards 2023



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33 Clarendon Road, Belfast, BT1 3BG
PUBLISHED BY: Mediahuis Ireland Ltd, 27-32 Talbot Street, Dublin 1



Comment from the chair

I am delighted to offer my congratulations to all the 2023 finalists in the SFA National Small Business Awards programme. Now in their nineteenth year, these awards celebrate achievement, innovation, and excellence amongst small firms, and it is these very qualities that are evident in the companies featured in this special awards supplement.

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

The people involved here are truly representative of the diversity of entrepreneurship in Ireland, from environmentally-friendly companies to established and traditional, family-run businesses.

As our economy deals with current challenges, these companies will play a significant part in sustaining and driving growth in Ireland's indigenous sector.

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

business, supports entrepreneurship and rewards risk takers.

The businesses profiled here have availed of a fantastic programme to date as part of the SFA National Small Business Awards.

As well as extensive media and PR benefits from becoming a finalist, all of these companies have received a subsidised training package and a strategic management masterclass weekend. They have also showcased their products and services in the Awards Village at the SFA Business Connect flagship event. In conclusion, I would like to thank our sponsors and judges for their continued support in making the entire awards programme possible.

Our very hardworking judges include: Sue O'Neill of Shellcove and awards judging panel chair, Mairead Cirillo of Environmental Business Advice; Tom Cooney of TU Dublin; Jon Ihle from the *Irish Independent*; Padraig Sheerin from Three; Brian O'Kane of Oaktree Press; Professor Frank Roche, chairman of Dublin Business Innovation Centre; Geraldine Lavin of 3rdi and Ken Germaine of Germaine Business Planning. I wish all the finalist companies the best of luck tonight at the Gala Final and in the future.

Geraldine Magnier
SFA chair and director
of *Idiro Analytics*

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RESILIENT AND RESOURCEFUL

Despite the challenges posed by inflation, recovery from Covid-19, Brexit and the war in Ukraine, small businesses in Ireland continue to hold their own, writes David Broderick, director of the SFA

Ireland is a nation of entrepreneurs. Small firms with fewer than 50 employees account for 98% of the total number of businesses in Ireland, employing nearly half of the private sector workforce. They are present in every village, town and city in the country. This is reflected in the entrants to this year's Small Firms Association (SFA) National Small Business Awards who come from all over the country, competing and showcasing the vast range of diverse businesses that can be found across Ireland.

Despite the challenging international environment, Ireland's economy remains resilient in 2023, with our public finances, employment rates and exports continuing to grow. This resilience is demonstrated in the domestic economy with entrepreneurs and small business owners reporting investment and expansion, domestic economic growth and upskilling as areas of opportunity for the year ahead.

However, economic headwinds continue to change and create a challenging landscape for small businesses.

As we pass the one-year mark of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, businesses continue to face inflationary pressures both in energy and non-energy industrial goods and services – all of which is adding to the cost of doing business.

Budget 2023 introduced supports for businesses to mitigate rising costs pressures, but as economic uncertainties continue it is essential that the Government listens to business concerns and supports them and the jobs they create.

Regulatory burden

2023 also marks a year of considerable change for small business owners in the area of employment law with the introduction of statutory sick pay from 1 January.

Further State-imposed increases in employment costs and regulation from the rollout of auto-enrolment, the living wage and other leave proposals already announced are forecasted to add around 2.8% to the total wage bill in the economy in the coming years.

In the longer term, over the next decade, the addition of higher PRSI for employers and employees in line

“Entrepreneurs and small business owners are reporting investment and expansion, domestic economic growth and upskilling as areas of opportunity.”



David Broderick, director,
Small Firms Association

with the Commission on Pensions recommendations and rising auto-enrolment rates will increase this to 9%.

While many of these policies have merit on their own terms, they will make the business landscape more difficult for small firms, as research on regulatory burdens and compliance costs indicates that where a large company may spend one euro per employee to comply with a regulatory duty, a small business might have to spend up to ten euros.

Going forward, the Government must acknowledge the growing burden of State-imposed employment costs and seek to coordinate legislation and the new regulatory administration burden in a phased manner.

Government must also ensure that all new legislation and regulations be considered under Ireland's SME Test, to assess its impact on our country's smallest employers.

On top of this small businesses are experiencing both labour and skills shortages, stepping up to respond to the climate crisis and adopting new digital processes into their enterprises.

Continuing support

There is no doubt that for many small firms, the next few years will prove challenging. In many cases, business owners will not have the skills, margins, economies of scale and in-house human resources to mitigate the impact of existing and new challenges.

As the leading membership organisation for small businesses in Ireland, the SFA understands the challenges and issues

facing small firms. Through our business and HR advice, we will continue to assist business owners with HR queries and keep them informed of the latest HR and employment-law news. In addition, through our lobbying activity at regional, national and EU level we will continue to represent small business views and work to create an environment that is conducive to success.

At this time of change it is essential that business owners and their staff are equipped with the right skills to ensure their enterprise survives and grows.

The SFA's MentorsWork programme provides supports through mentoring and targeted learning opportunities to help businesses across Ireland sustain and improve their companies. This free training and upskilling programme in partnership with Skillnet Ireland gives small business owners and their staff the skills required to be productive in a shifting business environment.

Success is achievable

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

These awards would not be possible without the generous support of our sponsors. This support highlights their commitment to small businesses in Ireland and I would like to express our gratitude to each of them: Bord Bia, Cisco, DeCare, IE, Enterprise Ireland, National Standards Authority of Ireland, One4all Rewards, Sage, Strategic Banking

“This year's finalists demonstrate that success is achievable with a clear business vision and a sense of optimism, passion, drive and perseverance.”

Corporation of Ireland, Permanent TSB, and to Skillnet Ireland, our management training partner, and our media partner the *Irish Independent*.

I am delighted that once again this year we have a very special charity donation for our winning company. Our 2022 overall winner Aalto Bio Reagents has very kindly donated a special bursary of €5,000, which the winning company this year can donate to a charity of its choice. I would like to extend our sincere gratitude to Philip Noone and the Aalto Bio Reagents team for this very generous donation.

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

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

STRIKING A BALANCE

Appointed head of business banking at Permanent TSB in December and with four decades of experience with various businesses, Tom Leahy is passionate about making a difference in terms of SME funding

When Permanent TSB's acquisition of certain elements of Ulster Bank's retail, SME and asset finance business in the Republic of Ireland is complete, it will increase its team of people specifically focused on business banking from 40 to around 70.

In January, 25 former Ulster Bank branches were acquired by Permanent TSB, giving the brand a presence in 98 communities nationwide. The final part of the transaction, expected to be complete by the end of the first half of this year, will be the transfer of the Lombard asset finance business to Permanent TSB.

"In line with our Business Banking Strategy, we have been doubling activity levels year on year and that is continuing. Based on our current trajectory of growth, our objective is to achieve €1bn in SME lending over the next three years," says Tom Leahy, head of business banking, Permanent TSB.

"We are focused on delivering a best-in-class customer experience for businesses, serving them over the phone, through branches, online and onsite."

"Permanent TSB has been serving its communities for over 200 years and now our capacity has increased further.

"We want to leverage the knowledge and expertise of our superb business banking team – which has huge sectoral experience in areas including hospitality, engineering and retail – to talk to and understand SME businesses and provide the appropriate solutions to help them to achieve their ambitions.

Customer experience

"We are focused on delivering a best-in-class customer experience for those businesses, serving them over the phone, through branches, online and onsite. All of our front-line people are mobile and learn a lot more by talking to business owners in their own premises."

In this context, Permanent TSB is very focused on getting the balance right between digital support and in-person customer engagement, he adds.

"A core part of our strategy is to have the technology piece but that it is fronted by touch – this means our people being there for big moments such as a client buying property, expanding into a new market or



Tom Leahy, head of business banking, Permanent TSB

developing new products. People are at the heart of SMEs and we will always have people at the very forefront of our dealings with them."

Permanent TSB continuously evolves its business banking offering to support SME customer needs.

Partnerships have become increasingly important in this regard. "Over the past three years, we have done a huge amount of work with the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland [SBCI] as an on-lender for various schemes, including the Growth and Sustainability Loan Scheme introduced this year," says Leahy.

"By the end of Q1, we will have allocated a total of over €80m in funding from SBCI schemes to SMEs."

Trusted partner

Permanent TSB partners also include Bibby Financial Services to enhance its offering in the working capital

space and Worldpay and Sentinel for payments solutions. It has also partnered with Digital Business Ireland to show Permanent TSB's commitment to supporting SMEs with digital transformation.

Bringing value

"Our objective is to bring value to business owners and for our team to be trusted advisors who share their experiences having dealt with multiple partners and businesses to help to point SMEs in the right direction – whether this is a particular product or solution or further supports and information," says Leahy.

"A fundamental thing for any business to understand is what is going on in the market and having a plan to deal with challenges and disruption.

"On top of the lingering effects of Covid-19 and Brexit, SMEs are now forced to deal with rising costs and a changing interest-

PERMANENT TSB'S SENIOR BUSINESS BANKING TEAM

Tom Leahy, head of business banking

– over four decades dealing with business customers supporting their banking needs, both in Ireland and UK. Was also CEO of a large regional law practice and is a Regional Executive Committee member with Ibec.

Mark Harris, regional and sectoral head of business banking

– previously head of telecom and media investment at another financial institution, having worked for Mazars and EY.

David McCarthy, regional and sectoral head of business banking

– an experienced business banker leading the Permanent TSB team of business banking managers in Dublin.

Elaine Dunne, regional and sectoral head of business banking

– an experienced business banker who joined Permanent TSB in 2020. Now leading a team of business banking managers in the North East and West.

Killian O'Flynn, certified bank director and business lead

for the transition of the Asset Finance and Business Direct units from Ulster Bank Ireland DAC.

Catherine Doyle, head of business development

– a career banker with over 30 years' experience, having joined Permanent TSB in 2016.

rate environment. This is all feeding into other challenges such as attracting and retaining talent.

"With the litany of challenges we've seen, one thing I've found is that the SME community is the most resilient aspect of the landscape, as SMEs invariably turn challenges into opportunities.

"One of the key reasons Ireland is one of the most innovative countries across the EU is the fact that a lot of Irish business owners are so adaptable, flexible and agile.

"Their contribution to communities is so impactful and they are a key part of the value chain for multinationals operating here. I see the quality of Irish SMEs as one of the reasons multinationals stay in this economy."



Joe and Paul Finnegan, directors, Finnegan's Farm

Potato specialists

Meath-based Finnegan's Farm is re-imagining the humble Irish potato for the cash-rich, time-poor modern consumer who wants food that is tasty, convenient and healthy

The current incumbents at Finnegan's Farm are the fifth generation of the family to farm the land at Balrath in the heart of the historic Boyne Valley. While potatoes were just a small part of what was produced on the farm in years gone by, all of that changed under the direction of brothers Paul and Joe Finnegan.

"We used to sell fresh potatoes from the farm, but saw an opportunity to do so much more," Paul Finnegan explains. "We recognised that consumer tastes were changing and wanted to do something to tap into that market."

A decade on and the company now employs 30 staff and supplies an extensive range of own- and private-label, value-added chilled products to over 120 retail stores nationwide, including listings with Dunnes Stores and SuperValu. It also supplies significant volumes of potato-based products to the foodservice sector daily.

The Finnegan's Farm product portfolio numbers 28 different potato-based variants. These include everything from ready-cooked chips, spiced chips, roast potatoes, baked potatoes and wedges to garlic cubes, potato gratin and cheese-and-onion croquettes.

"We are focused on making products

"We recognised that consumer tastes were changing and wanted to do something to tap into that market."

that are simple, consistent and convenient," says Paul. "We rarely use more than two or three ingredients – it's always potato-based, but with a twist. All of our products are gluten-free. We have our own in-house chef who is constantly experimenting with new flavours to add to our portfolio."

Farm to fork

All product lines are planted, grown, harvested, cooked and packed on site. Not only does this ensure there is total control over the various elements of the supply chain at all times, but also makes Finnegan's Farm products amongst the most environmentally-sustainable on the market with a near-seamless journey from farm to fork.

Paul gives a lot of credit to the staff for the company's continued success. "We achieved our original goals about two years ahead of plan. Much of that is down to our staff who take a lot of pride in what they do," he says.

"They have come with us every step on this journey. It's like an extended family. The atmosphere is always good, which is reflected in very low turnover of personnel."

In addition to adding to the product portfolio, future plans include streamlining the production process where possible to make it less labour intensive and possibly a foray into the frozen foods sector. "We are also looking at the export market," Paul adds. "We believe there will be strong demand for our products in the UK and elsewhere in Europe."

Finnegan's Farm is also shortlisted in the Food & Drink category

Let there be light

Harte Outdoor Lighting has been a leading manufacturer of bespoke outdoor lighting products for the past 40 years, offering a wide range of designs

Established by Willie Harte back in 1983, Harte Outdoor Lighting remains very much a family-run business with Liz Harte and her son Jack now at the helm. From small beginnings the company has enjoyed strong growth over the past 40 years. It is now headquartered in a modern, 3,000 sq m manufacturing, warehousing and showroom facility near New Ross, Co Wexford.

While much has changed over the years, the commitment to design excellence and traditional craftsmanship that initially drove Willie Harte remains as strong as ever today with the next generation of the family.

Harte Outdoor Lighting supplies premium quality wall lights, lamp-post lights, hanging lanterns, bollard lights, post boxes and camera poles to both the public and private sectors. Clients range from private households, hotels and hospitals to county councils and other public bodies with its products being used in gardens, streets, parks and walkways.

Examples of the company's work can be seen in Áras an Uachtaráin, Adare Manor and the K Club, amongst other

"We have a strong new product development pipeline with our design team working constantly to bring new, more sustainable products to market."

prestigious locations. Using sustainable components made from recycled steel and iron products such as car engines, the company offers bespoke solutions designed and manufactured to individual customer requirements. This is in addition to a 150-strong standard product portfolio, with all work adhering to relevant EU standards and guaranteed for life.

New product development

Innovation and expertise have been central to the company's success to date, according to Jack Harte. "We have a strong new product development pipeline with our design team working constantly to bring new, more sustainable products to market as we look to minimise our carbon footprint," he says.

"We're also fortunate to have a very experienced and loyal team who know the industry inside out. Our 15 staff members have been with us for a total of 132 years between them, which is a remarkable statistic."

The immediate future will see a big push on the digital side of the business with the launch of a full online store facility. "This will increase our reach significantly and give us access to an entirely new set of customers," notes Jack.

"We are also looking to expand our export business into the likes of France and Germany over the next two to three years through partnerships with sales agents and retail stores. We hope to link up with other family-run businesses of a similar size and outlook to our own in those markets."

"In the meantime, we will continue to develop new product lines for our customers. We are currently prototyping a range of solar-powered units that we are very excited about."



Jack and Liz Harte, directors, Harte Outdoor Lighting



John Byrne, chief executive officer, Hygeia

Back to nature

Hygeia manufactures a wide range of fully-sustainable treatment products for the Irish, UK and European home-garden, agricultural and veterinary markets

Based in Oranmore, Co Galway, Hygeia was founded by Dr Donny Coyle in 1939 initially to develop a chemical-based treatment to protect grain seed against fungicidal attack. With the prospect of war on the horizon, there was fear of widespread food shortages and the country's critical grain reserves needed to be protected.

It proved hugely successful and when the war ended Coyle applied his expertise to develop new treatments that could be used right across the agricultural sector. He also branched out into the veterinary market, developing a treatment to prevent the spread of parasites in sheep.

The company, which is still owned by the Coyle family, continued to thrive over the succeeding years, constantly evolving to meet changing market demands through the research and development of new solutions. It began developing products for the home-garden sector in the 1980s. This has since become the mainstay of its business, now accounting for around 70% of total turnover.

Having expanded into the UK in the early 1990s, Hygeia now exports to France, Germany and a number of other

EU countries. Employing 35 full-time staff and a further ten during peak seasonal demand periods, it is the last remaining indigenous manufacturer of home-garden treatments in Ireland.

With all production activities adhering to stringent EU safety and quality standards, Hygeia currently manufactures more than 450 product variants across its home-garden, agricultural and veterinary business.

These range from bird feed, lawn care and weed control treatments to spray tank cleaners, sheep dip and maggot control. The vast majority (over 400) are aimed at the home-garden market, including the 15-strong multi-award-winning Nature Safe range, which was launched in 2019.

Safe and sustainable

"Our primary goal is to develop safe, environmentally-sustainable products for all of our customers," explains John Byrne, chief executive officer, Hygeia. "We are constantly re-assessing the ingredients and materials we use to see how they could be more environmentally-friendly."

"Most of our packaging is now fully recyclable as we continue to move away from plastic. We also look to nature, the sea shore in particular, to find natural alternatives that can be used in our treatments. Our aim is simple: to use nature to replenish nature."

For the future, Byrne will be looking to grow the company's export business over the next few years, particularly in the UK market which he sees as offering significant potential. There are also plans to launch five new Nature Safe products this year, while many of the existing lines in the range will also be re-launched in more convenient sizes.

"We are constantly re-assessing the ingredients and materials we use to see how they could be more environmentally-friendly."

www.hygeia.ie

Windows on the world

Family-run K&K Windows is one of the leading manufacturers and installers of bespoke uPVC and aluminium windows, doors and conservatories in the country

Based just outside Craanford, Co Wexford, K&K Windows began in 1995 as a small business on a family farm near Gorey. Since then it has grown exponentially and now employs 48 full-time staff across its purpose-built factory, warehouse and showroom facilities on the same site.

The farm is still there, but the land is rented out as the Kenny family focuses all of its attention on the thriving manufacturing business, which supplies to a growing customer base across the residential, commercial and industrial sectors.

The company offers an extensive range of windows, doors and conservatory/sun-room styles and finishes to suit all building types from the traditional to the very modern, with all products designed, manufactured and assembled in Craanford.

"The difference between us and most of our competitors is that we design, manufacture and install all of our products to individual customer requirements," explains managing director Sorcha Kenny. "There's no middle-man and no dealing with third-party suppliers for our clients, which

makes it easier to control installation timelines and keep costs down."

Kenny puts the company's success to date down to two main factors – a strong pipeline of new designs and product variants coupled with a commitment to providing a top-class after-sales service.

Success factors

"Both of these factors have been hugely important in the K&K story," she says. "It's a tribute to all of our staff, most of whom have been with us for 15 years or more with several here for at least 25 years. We have a strong blend of experience and expertise and pride ourselves on the quality of our after-sales service, which has helped to generate lots of repeat business over the years."

K&K products can be found in countless residential projects nationwide in addition to the prestigious K Club in Kildare and Amber Springs Hotel in Gorey, amongst many other places.

Kenny is optimistic about the company's prospects for the next few years and anticipates continued strong growth in Ireland as it looks to expand into the UK and the EU markets.

"We have great hopes for our Resident 7 flush uPVC window range for which we are one of very few suppliers in the country. It offers a modern, clean-line finish which is proving extremely popular with customers," she says.

"We also have plans to invest around €1.5m over the next two years to upgrade both our factory and showroom facilities in Craanford. This will help to shorten lead times and allow us to offer a wider product range to our customers going forward."

"We have a strong blend of experience and expertise and pride ourselves on the quality of our after-sales service."



Thomas and Sorcha Kenny, managing directors, K&K Windows

www.kkwindows.ie



The Moffett Automated Storage team

The storage gurus

Co Monaghan-based Moffett Automated Storage's revolutionary, end-to-end automated warehousing system is helping customers to reduce storage costs and lower their carbon emissions

The Moffett name is synonymous with warehousing and logistics over several generations as the family has used its engineering know-how to develop innovative solutions for the industry. The most famous of these is perhaps the Moffett Mountry, a versatile forklift vehicle invented by Cecil Moffett almost 40 years ago and still used in warehouses and storage facilities around the world.

The innovation gene runs deep within the family with Cecil's grandson Sam Moffett the latest to develop a revolutionary new solution. In collaboration with Joonas Ryyanen, now director of software engineering at the company, he founded Moffett Automated Storage in 2017 to develop a flexible, fully-automated, end-to-end warehousing and logistics system – the Moffett A S/R 4D Taxi – which can be scaled up or down to suit enterprises of all sizes.

The system has proven hugely popular as it maximises use of warehouse space and pallet storage, thereby significantly reducing energy costs and lowering carbon footprint. It was used to manage some of the storage and distribution of personal protective equipment during the pandemic, playing a key role in ensuring that medical teams had access to supplies as and when required.

Growth spurt

Moffett Automated Storage has grown exponentially over the past few years, now employing 43 highly-trained staff including software engineers, CAD designers and technicians and electrical engineers.

It has clients in the US, Canada and the Middle East as well as Ireland, the UK and throughout the EU, all of which are monitored by the specialist support team

“There has been a marked move towards increased automation industry-wide and we are well-positioned to respond to that demand.”

Moffett Automated Storage is also shortlisted in the Innovator of the Year category

based in Clontibret, Co Monaghan.

Industries served include manufacturing, automotive, healthcare, warehousing and logistics and food and drink – the company has even designed a bespoke system for the world's first automated banana-ripening facility.

Projects generally take four to six months to complete from initial consultancy through design, testing and commissioning with full 24/7 after sales service provided for all clients, according to operations manager Adam Montgomery.

“The after-sales element is critical as it gives customers peace of mind from the outset that we will be there to smooth out any issues should they arise,” he explains. “There has been a marked move towards increased automation industry-wide in the wake of the pandemic and we are well-positioned to respond to that demand. Our systems are flexible with constant software updates to meet changing conditions and requirements in real time.”

Montgomery anticipates further strong growth over the next couple of years as the company looks to break into new industry sectors. “In the meantime we will continue to innovate and develop new automated products and solutions for our customers,” he adds.

Heating things up

Family-owned Woodco Energy is playing a key role in driving adoption of renewable energy resources in Ireland, the UK and other parts of Europe

Based in Donaskeigh, Co Tipperary, Woodco Energy began life back in the early 1970s when Gerard Crosse Sr. began manufacturing and repairing solid fuel tanks and agricultural equipment. He soon decided to extend his product offering to include back boilers which could be used to heat multiple rooms at the same time.

In addition to designing his own model, he also imported boilers from Italy and Germany to support a growing customer base across the residential and commercial sectors throughout Ireland.

The arrival of the next generation of the family into the business in the late 2000s coincided with a shift in direction towards renewable energy. Brothers Declan and Gerard Jr looked to develop a line of more environmentally-friendly products and services to meet changing consumer requirements.

Amongst their earliest innovations was an outdoor wood-pellet boiler which was installed in a number of social housing schemes, hotels, leisure centres and care homes across the UK. Woodco

Energy also designed and installed three wood-pellet boilers for the athletes' village at the 2012 London Olympics – a prestigious contract win which helped to significantly boost the company's profile.

Domestic drive

However, Brexit came as a severe blow and the brothers decided to re-focus on the domestic market. “We knew that Ireland had one of the lowest uptakes of renewable energy resources in Europe and saw an opportunity to change this,” explains commercial manager Gerard Crosse Jr.

Aided by government incentives such as the Support Scheme for Renewable Heat, Woodco Energy now employs 30 staff and supplies biomass boilers and other renewable heating solutions to a growing customer base. This includes schools, hospitals, hotels, agriculture and domestic users.

Innovation has been central to the company's success to date and a dedicated in-house R&D team ensures that there is always a strong pipeline of new product developments. Recent additions to the portfolio include the EcoCabin, a pre-packaged, ‘plug-in and go’ plant room, a new wood-pellet cooker and a woodchip-blower storage solution.

“We are always looking for new solutions to help our customers lower their carbon footprint,” notes Crosse.

With turnover set to exceed €7m in 2023, he anticipates strong growth over the next couple of years as the company looks to exploit what it sees as significant exporting potential. “We see Portugal, the UK and France in particular as offering good growth opportunities,” he says. “We feel our product offering means that we are well-placed to grow our presence in these markets over the next few years.”

Woodco Energy is also shortlisted in the Innovator of the Year category

“We knew that Ireland had one of the lowest uptakes of renewable energy resources in Europe and saw an opportunity to change this.”



Ger Crosse, commercial director, WoodCo Energy

BUILDING CAPABILITY

Irish food and drink brands need to get to grips with changing consumer dynamics and supports are available to help them with ongoing challenges, writes Claudia Saumell, client capability manager at Bord Bia

In recent years, small businesses have had to overcome the economic and social challenges brought about by successive lockdowns, supply chain constraints and rising energy costs. Food and drink suppliers, retailers and foodservice operators have had to refine their strategies in order to adapt to mounting challenges in the market.

Meanwhile, the average consumer has also evolved into a more conscious shopper, one that carefully scrutinises what they're putting in their shopping basket. It's clear that the cost-of-living crisis has heavily impacted consumer dynamics with even the most carefree consumers feeling some kind of financial pinch. For food and drink suppliers, understanding this new dynamic is crucial if they want to get shoppers' attention.

Bord Bia's Insight and Innovation centre, Bord Bia Thinking House, recently conducted an 'Inflationary Impact' report to understand how customer choice is being impacted by inflation, and how brands can adapt to meet their changing needs.

The report found that consumers are focused on buying only the essentials. What constitutes 'the essentials' is dependent upon the household budget. For the less financially secure, this could mean fewer items in their shopping basket. They are 'doing more with less' and they maximise what they can – for example, by choosing products suitable for freezing or that can stretch to more than one meal.

For the more financially secure, buying 'the essentials' could mean putting the same number of items in the basket but looking for cheaper alternatives. They are exploring what compromises they want to make, shopping around to find the best deals and increasingly switching from brands to own-label. Brands need to ask themselves if they are doing enough to grab attention in order to win these consumers back.



Claudia Saumell, client capability manager, Bord Bia

Targeted supports

As increased costs across the agri-food supply chain put the viability of many of our Irish producers at risk, it is critical that Bord Bia has targeted supports in place to assist them through these challenging times. With this in mind, we are in regular contact with Irish food, drink and horticulture companies, trade customers and consumers to work together to help alleviate some of the pressure being felt.

Last year, Bord Bia hosted a four-part webinar series to inform Irish companies on how best to navigate cost inflation. Over 180 companies attended the webinar series which covered topics including:

- Procurement in crisis mode
- How to manage and mitigate rising costs and how suppliers can best prepare for price-increase negotiations

- Managing unprecedented inflation through price-increase campaigns (in partnership with Enterprise Ireland)
- How Irish consumers are navigating the cost-of-living crisis.

In the face of global uncertainty, Bord Bia supports SMEs in building their capability to evaluate, plan and deliver growth in strategically selected and priority markets. For many SMEs, exporting to the UK or continental Europe may seem daunting but it is an inevitable part of building a scalable business.

Bord Bia's digital Learning Zone platform hosts a series of self-learning modules to immerse businesses in the basics of exporting, supporting them to consolidate the national scope of markets and set out future export ambitions.

Accelerator programme

In addition to the self-learning modules, Bord Bia, in collaboration with Enterprise Ireland and Teagasc, delivers the Food Works accelerator programme. This provides SMEs with investment, mentorship from an experienced industry professional; access to brand development, packaging design and consumer research services, technical support and capability development and advice on the investment journey.

Since its inception in 2012, Food Works has helped to transform participating brands and catapult them onto the Irish food and drink landscape, armed with a clear vision, compelling value proposition and equipped for growth.

For more established food suppliers already trading in export markets,

“The average consumer has evolved into a more conscious shopper, one that carefully scrutinises what they're putting in their shopping basket.”

focusing on maximising their efficiencies in their business model is pivotal. The marketplace has evolved so much over the past few years that even existing strategies developed and put in place by brands pre-pandemic may not be robust enough to help them deal with the new norms imposed by inflation.

Supports around reviewing and building commercial marketing strategies, digital marketing, key customer management, category management and product innovation are available for Bord Bia clients that want to review their strategies.

Trends and intelligence

The last two clusters of supports on offer to Bord Bia clients focus on brand development and insights and information support. Brand owners should examine whether their brand's message aligns with some of the newly-identified shopper traits. If the brand isn't making enough of an impact, it's time to reposition it to regain market share and grow awareness in alternative channels – or maybe there's an opportunity to create a new brand.

Affordable research resources such as BI:TES, Taste 'n' Tell and Omnibus as well as bespoke brand research and brand development are some of the services available to Bord Bia clients to help brands better understand their consumers, provide direction for the brand and create value into the future.

Keeping abreast of the newest food trends and category insights is vitally important during changing times. Validating your business strategy based on short-, medium- and long-term data will provide a shopper-customer holistic view that will help companies to retain and increase business growth. Bord Bia's library can provide leading market and consumer insight as well as market trends and market intelligence for all food companies manufacturing in Ireland.

Companies that want to become Bord Bia clients and avail of these supports need to submit a client request form on www.bordbia.ie.





Philip Delaney, owner, Dairyglen Products

Cream of the crop

Family business Dairyglen provides best-in-class ice cream, milkshake and frozen beverage solutions across Ireland and the UK and its exclusive ice cream brand Smooch is growing fast

Having started in 1991 initially just selling soft-serve ice cream to retailers, co-founders of Dairyglen Edgar Delaney and his son Geoffrey noticed that a lot can go wrong with the equipment. Edgar had worked in the ice cream industry for 15 years.

“Ice cream machines are complex and typically take about three hours to clean. They became aware that no-one was addressing this with engineer support and saw no reason why they couldn’t do it,” says marketing manager Kirstie Delaney, who is part of the third generation of the family to get involved in the business, which now employs 34 people.

They went into supplying equipment; then acquired the Smooch ice cream brand shortly after. This led to Dairyglen’s unique selling point: a full, end-to-end solution including installation and maintenance of the machines, menu development, staff training and marketing. “When you show a retailer how to take ice cream seriously like this, you get similar results to good coffee service,” Kirstie explains.

“In the past couple of years

“As we grow we want the service to be more bespoke. Ultimately we want to offer retailers better solutions for ice cream.”

the introduction of a 4D Bluetooth system to monitor and maintain machines has allowed us to grow very quickly and scale the business properly. We partnered with Italian family-run company Gel Matic to develop the technology. A lot of the time we can fix issues remotely. Otherwise an engineer is sent to a retailer within 48 hours following an automatic alert. This reduces a lot of problems for retailers.”

Growing popularity

The Smooch ice cream concept is now in around 200 locations, primarily forecourt convenience stores in Ireland, and recently entered the UK. In 2022, Dairyglen partnered with Cadbury to create Cadbury Smooch Cups, which included a big food-truck launch with onsite activation in Ireland. These products are soon to be introduced in the UK.

Dairyglen also has a working partnership with coffee chain Insomnia involving 80 machines in Ireland and the UK and a full end-to-end service.

“People started to understand what ice cream could be through our Smooch consumer brand. With clients such as Insomnia that don’t want their own brand of ice cream we can help them to add it to their menu – for example at Christmas or Halloween – and improve their margins as a result. This could be an iced cappuccino made using ice cream instead of milk or adding a tiny portion of ice cream on the side with a brownie,” says Kirstie.

“As we grow we want the service to be more bespoke. Ultimately we want to offer retailers better solutions for ice cream.”

Dairyglen is also shortlisted in the Services category

www.dairyglen.ie

Organic growth

Inspired by the coast and passionate about food sustainability, Peter and Birgitta Curtin have made organic Irish salmon the star of their Burren Smokehouse tourism experience

Burren Smokehouse was founded 34 years ago as a food tourism destination and centre of excellence of Irish artisan food for visitors to taste as they travel through the magical landscape of the Co Clare location. This has remained the core of the business, which welcomes 45,000 people a year from all over the world to its visitor centre.

The couple behind the venture, Birgitta and Peter Curtin, drew from their food provenance experience in their diverse birth places – Birgitta on a farm on the edge of the Baltic Sea where she witnessed local fishermen smoking eel and Peter on the Atlantic west coast of Ireland.

“Burren Smokehouse was one of the first companies in Ireland to focus on the sustainability of small-batch production, 100% sourced in Ireland and our gastropub, The Roadside Tavern, was one of the first hospitality outlets to specialise in serving organic Irish food,” says Birgitta.

With the support of Fáilte Ireland, Burren Smokehouse launched the

‘Taste the Atlantic – Irish Salmon Visitor Experience’ in 2019 and a new website, www.burrenexperiences.ie, went live in spring 2022 promoting it along with other experiences in the area.

VIP experience

Also last year, Burren Smokehouse introduced an “ultralux” experience for small groups of six to eight people. “These chauffeur-driven groups often tell us they have tasted our salmon in the Merrion Hotel, Ashford Castle or Dromoland Castle. We talk through the history and how to smoke the salmon, bring them downstairs to the production area and then Peter entertains them with stories while showing them his microbrewery,” says Birgitta.

Irish organic salmon and other Burren foods are available for food gifting online and can be shipped worldwide. “One American couple who came here wanted to serve our salmon and brown bread from the pub for lunch while sharing photos and stories of their holiday here. We can deliver to the US within 48 hours,” says Birgitta.

Over the years, Burren Smokehouse has built up its physical retail presence from a few independent stores such as Fallon & Byrne and Avoca to supplying for the Simply Better range in Dunnes Stores. Around half of its turnover of organic salmon is for Christmas, when the workforce goes up from 20 to 30 people to meet demand.

“The nutritional element of the food produced in the Burren is extremely high – for example, we have found that Omega 3 and 6 are ten times higher in our organic salmon compared with the Scottish equivalent. This year, I want to highlight the importance of these products to gut health as part of wellness events,” says Birgitta.

“Burren Smokehouse was one of the first companies in Ireland to focus on the sustainability of small-batch production, 100% sourced in Ireland.”



Birgitta Curtin, co-founder, Burren Smokehouse

www.burrensmokehouse.ie



Philip Martin, founder and CEO, Blanco Niño

Mexican marvel

The Blanco Niño tortilla chips brand gained significant traction in the past year and the business continues to thrive in the European foodservice sector

Launched in 2015 by founder and CEO Philip Martin, Blanco Niño's traditional approach to producing Mexican corn tortillas has led to an impressive foothold in the European foodservice market and is now seeing it grow rapidly in the European retail market.

It all started when Martin set up his first Mexican restaurant in Dublin and couldn't find corn tortillas of the quality he had come to love in Mexico's famous taquerias. So he embarked on a road trip across Mexico to learn how to make authentic corn tortillas.

When the business launched it occupied a small corner of a 14,000 sq ft facility in Clonmel, Co Tipperary and employed 14 people. Now eight years on the corn tortilla manufacturer has grown to occupy the entire space and more and now employs 42 people and is selling across 16 European markets and counting.

"We make our tortillas and chips using whole, non-genetically modified, sustainably-grown corn, water, salt and lime. The corn

is cooked, then steeped for over 16 hours before being grinded into a corn dough called masa. This process known as nixtamalisation is a traditional Mexican technique going back thousands of years," explains Martin.

Ramping up retail

Blanco Niño's retail business has grown in leaps and bounds over the past two years, since the launch of its range of tortilla chips in August 2020, he adds. "Last year in particular saw sales grow significantly within Dunnes Stores and SuperValu as more people discovered the brand. We also launched in Tesco and Stach in the Netherlands and partnered with Richmond Marketing to further drive development of the brand."

Over 2,000 retail outlets now stock Blanco Niño's tortilla chips across Ireland, the UK and mainland Europe, up from 500 outlets a year ago. There are currently three flavours of Blanco Niño tortilla chips in the retail market - Lightly Salted, Chilli & Lime and Blue Corn. In 2022, they received five Great Taste Awards between them and the Chilli & Lime variety was awarded Gold at Blas na hÉireann.

"Excitingly, we'll be launching two new flavours over the coming months along with our long-anticipated range of salsas this summer to complement our tortilla chip range," notes Martin.

"Our foodservice range which got us started on day one continues to go from strength to strength. Blanco Niño is now very much positioned and recognised as the best-in-market producer of quality, traditional tortillas for Mexican restaurants and chefs across Europe."

Blanco Niño is also shortlisted in the Exporter of the Year category

"We'll be launching two new flavours over the coming months along with our long-anticipated range of salsas this summer."

www.blanco-nino.com

Working a treat

Now ten years in business, Ice Cream Treats has perfected a premium ice cream parlour concept and its Moo'd brand is growing in Ireland and the UK

Ice Cream Treats' big break came in 2013 when it presented an opportunity to Musgrave Retail Partners to develop and create an in-store premium ice cream parlour concept - something which didn't exist in the market at the time.

Over the next three years, Ice Cream Treats and Musgrave trialed several different concepts until they were convinced they had optimised the offering. This led to the launch of the Moo'd brand in Musgrave Retail Partners stores backed by a full end-to-end support package from Ice Cream Treats.

"We now have over 400 stores on the island of Ireland serving our Moo'd products. Due to the great success of the brand, Musgrave Retail Partners decided to extend the format and launch Moo'd ice cream in 500ml tubs in 2019. A range of six different flavours is now available in all SuperValu and Centra outlets in Ireland," says Ice Cream Treats founder and managing director Gerard Sheridan, who has 29 years' sales management experience in the dairy industry in Ireland and the UK.

Based in Co Cavan and employing a

team of ten people, Ice Cream Treats' growth is accelerating in 2023 with its foodservice offering both in Ireland and the UK. The pipeline for growth in the UK is strong with work ongoing with retail chains and quick-service restaurants to introduce new ice cream concepts.

"We have continued to grow our partnership with Whitbread in the UK, supplying over 440 branded restaurants with frozen yoghurt, vegan deserts and Baileys ice cream," says Sheridan. "We recently completed a supply contract to support Whitbread with an ice cream parlour concept similar to Moo'd, which will cover 60 restaurant and garden sites this year and 160 sites by the end of 2024."

New developments

In Ireland, Ice Cream Treats has expanded its customer base with new supply agreements with Roosters Piri Piri and Supermac's for bespoke ice cream products. There will be a number of new product launches for retail in 2023 under the Ice Cream Treats brand, including frozen yoghurt in 460ml tubs, a vegan frozen desert product in 460ml tubs and a range of frozen cakes.

"Our key strength with partnerships is that we're adaptable to customers' needs and can make bespoke, unique products for them. We are on the ground with customers, helping them with sales plans, training, social media content and working with them to ensure we deliver a best-in-class offering," says Sheridan.

"We are constantly looking at ways to deliver new and exciting products that delight customers and set us apart from the competition, both in terms of our authentic, delicious flavours and unique product benefits. We ensure we make the best products using locally-sourced Irish milk."

"Due to the brand's success, Musgrave Retail Partners decided to extend the format and launch Moo'd ice cream in 500ml tubs."



Gerard Sheridan, managing director, Ice Cream Treats

www.icecreamtreats.ie

TIMELY TECHNOLOGY

Caroline Burke, small business manager at Cisco, outlines some important areas for SMEs to consider in relation to using technology to their best advantage in 2023

Irish SME owners weathered the storm from the Covid-19 pandemic and, with spiralling costs being a top concern now, it's crucial to keep an eye on market changes. To survive and thrive, SMEs need to be smarter, leaner and capture every opportunity available.

Cisco is delighted to sponsor the Outstanding Small Business Award in the SFA National Small Business Awards.

Each year the nominees never fail to astound and energise us with their passion, focus and creativity. It's been quite a bumpy three years with the Covid-19 pandemic leading to soaring shipping and logistics costs, ongoing supply chain challenges followed by high inflation and energy costs.

Using technology to reach existing and new customers, be more cost effective and differentiate from competitors is a must for SMEs in the current environment. More than eight in ten small businesses say using new technology is key to their survival and growth. Many survived the pandemic by embracing technology that under normal circumstances would take months to onboard.

For 2023, here are some areas SMEs can focus on to help drive their business's success:

Make life difficult for hackers

According to Forbes: "Small and medium-sized businesses already make up over 41% of data breaches, but as large enterprises spend more on cybersecurity and adopt more robust frameworks, attackers will increasingly turn their attention to small businesses".

SMEs are particularly vulnerable to cyberattacks as they are the favoured targets of hackers. Securing your company and customer data is a top concern. The challenge with security is it can feel very intimidating to even know where to start to protect your business. Business owners recognise they need to invest in security solutions with a particular focus on a zero-trust policy, which means never trusting, always verifying.

"Using technology to reach existing and new customers, be more cost effective and differentiate from competitors is a must for SMEs."



Caroline Burke, small business manager, Cisco

Invest wisely

The impact of inflation means it's even more important for SMEs to effectively manage costs and one of the best ways to do this is to invest wisely in technology. There are so many different solutions out there and identifying key benefits such as automating processes, delivering cost savings and reaching new customers is crucial.

Adopting cloud solutions allows SMEs to realise these benefits while supporting their remote workers and ambition to grow. Through working with a managed service technology partner, SMEs can achieve simple procurement and installation, subscription pricing (no large technology outlay) and comprehensive support.

Enhance the experience

Hybrid and remote working are here to

stay. Today's workforce spends so much time on meetings, phone calls and emails. To remain motivated, at-home workers need anytime access to their apps, data and each other.

Delivering reliable collaboration tools supports improved productivity and staff retention. These tools are increasingly being used in customer interactions. If customers have a poor experience of a video call you set up, it could negatively impact their perception of your business. Make it a joy for participants every time by providing reliable and secure solutions, eliminating pain points that impact productivity.

Find a partner you trust

One of the issues faced by many small businesses when it comes to implementing new technology solutions is that they don't have the time and/or the

"With our technologies and strong partner community we can take a lot of worry off small business owners' plates."

necessary skills. The world of technology moves fast and it's good to futureproof your technology partnership as well as your IT itself.

A good technology partner will provide long-lasting value by ensuring your technology is fit to overcome the latest challenges - and future ones too. In the current climate, this is an important factor for any business.

Support and solutions

Cisco can deliver the advice, guidance and relevant products through our network of partners, allowing SMEs to focus on their core business. We have an experienced and established partner network in Ireland that works with organisations of all sizes.

This is underpinned by our dedicated SME solutions delivering simple, secure and flexible products and services at the right price. It's important to note that the following cloud-based solutions all support remote working, are easy to deploy, manage and access and we offer all on a free trial (no strings attached):

- **Meraki** - Smart, cloud-managed network solutions that make life simpler, saving you time and money.

- **WebEx** - Embrace the power of video conferencing and connect securely with your team on any device, from anywhere.

- **Umbrella** - Protect users from malicious Internet destinations whether they are on or off the network.

- **Duo Security-Drive** - Takes a zero-trust approach by verifying users' and devices' identities before granting access to your applications.

Small business owners don't wake up thinking about technology; they're preoccupied with driving their business. With our technologies and strong partner community we can take a lot of this worry off their plates. This can be a time of reimagining and reinventing your business, and many SMEs are doing this with technology.



Erica Hargaden and Janet Creighton, co-founders, Babogue

A hard day's night

Founder of Babogue Erica Hargaden is a dab hand at helping parents get their children to sleep – and her business is thriving off the back of it

Mum of three Erica Hargaden is frank about her experience trying to get her first-born – now 13 years old – to sleep when he was a baby; she says it nearly broke her. It would, however, stand to her many years later when she turned helping others in a similar situation into a career.

At the time she was working in events, and it wasn't until a few years later after she had her third child that she had the light-bulb moment. The seeds for Babogue were sown when her-now business partner Janet Creighton was struggling to get her six-month-old twin boys to sleep.

"She asked me for help and I talked her through it as best I could," says Hargaden. "A couple of weeks later, her husband jokingly said I should be doing it for a living."

This throwaway comment stayed with Hargaden and she started to research sleep consultancy. She completed online classes while continuing to hold down

"Parents are time poor, so being able to access services and content via their phones – at any time of day or night – is a priority."

her full-time job. In 2017 she started Babogue and soon found out there was a real market for her services.

In the early days she worked one to one with families, staying overnight and offering hands-on support. "Within about six months I was maxed out; I couldn't take on any more clients," she says.

Social-media push

Hargaden made good use of social media to create visibility for Babogue and word of mouth was also sending business her way. "I realised that my revenue was capped and I only had so many hours in the day. So I started thinking about how I could grow the business," she says.

In late 2018 she put some video content on social media; the 'Seven Steps to Better Sleep'. It struck a chord and she got queries as to when she would do more. It was then that she came up with the concept for Sleep Series – a suite of video-based child sleep courses at an affordable price. After putting about nine months into it, she launched it in October of 2019 and, she says, it simply "took off".

Babogue now has over 4,000 customers in 36 countries; while there are plenty of sleep consultants in Ireland, no one else is ticking the digital box in quite the same way. This, says Hargaden, is something today's parents want.

"Parents are time poor. They have in many ways taken their lives online, so being able to access services and content via their phones – at any time of day or night – is a priority."

www.babogue.com

A rising tide

In a few short years Dingle Sea Safari has made a real name for itself – buoyed by local support and the drive of the family behind it

Dingle Sea Safari started in 2018 when local man Jimmy Flannery, who had already spent decades both fishing and taking visitors out in boats to see Fungi, spotted a demand among customers to see a bit more than just the famous dolphin.

"There was an opportunity to take people all the way out along the peninsula to the Blaskets and back," says Jimmy's son Jamie Flannery, who works in the family business along with his dad, mother Bridget and brother Colm. They all bring their own distinct expertise to different aspects of the venture.

Dingle Sea Safari has been voted the number one activity in Dingle on Tripadvisor. And small wonder – those who partake get a close view of the Great Blasket Island, spot seals, enter caves and, a boon for Star Wars fans, get a peek at Luke Skywalker's hiding spot.

What sets Dingle Sea Safari apart from other boat trips in Dingle is the fact that it operates fast rigid inflatable boats (RIBs) that can travel up to 30km per hour.

"This means that people get to see the peninsula, the scenery, the wildlife and the caves in the space of just two and a half hours," says Jamie. "People can go out in the morning and be back for lunch. Also, we provide great customer service from start to finish, on and off the boat."

Gaining traction

Having started with just one vessel, the business now has three and will add a fourth later this year. The company's RIBs are also available for private hire for corporate events or occasions – an aspect of its operation that Jamie expects to gain further traction.

While the scenery speaks for itself, another pull of this particular boat trip is the fact that customers are treated to a guided tour while on board from one of the Flannerys. Hearing about the place from someone born and raised there has an appeal all of its own.

"People want the thrill of being out on the water, but they also want to hear about the history," says Jamie.

He is also noticing a tendency for tourists to want to spend a bit longer in each place they visit, rather than doing whistle-stop tours while ticking items off a list.

Meanwhile, running the business in Dingle as opposed to anywhere else offers its own rewards – and not just the beautiful location. There is, says Jamie, a genuine collaboration between businesses there. "We all work together not just to promote our own business but all the businesses in the town."

"People can go out in the morning and be back for lunch. Also, we provide great customer service from start to finish."



Jimmy Flannery, owner and Jamie Flannery, marketing manager, Dingle Sea Safari

www.dingleseasafari.com



Joanna Ciezka and Aleksandra Kieldanowicz, co-founders, Irish Socksciety

If the sock fits

Irish Socksciety took what is generally considered a humble item of clothing and gave it a next-level overhaul – and customers are loving it

If Joanna Ciezka and Alex Kieldanowicz have anything to do with it, the average Irish sock drawer will soon become a far more interesting place.

The founders of Irish Socksciety both hail from Poland but didn't get to know each other until they met in their adopted city of Galway. Having started a business in 2011 selling contemporary Irish souvenirs, they wanted to add a new product to their range. When they realised there was no dedicated sock brand in the country, they spotted an opportunity.

"We started to learn about producing socks, and it took quite a few months before we found factories that would work with us on the sustainable level we wanted," says Ciezka.

They learned how to design socks that not only looked great but were comfy and would last. They also did some solid market research before they pursued the idea in earnest. What emerged was a brand that emphasises the humour and 'craic' threaded through daily interactions in Ireland, as well as the Irish language.

"It took quite a few months before we found factories that would work with us on the sustainable level we wanted."

Sales channels

The business started out with 12 designs and sales were coming in within about three hours of its website going live. Fully up and running by October 2017, Irish Socksciety now sells via three channels: the website (regular purchases and subscriptions), in about 150 shops and via its bespoke service.

With the bespoke service, a business client such as a café might order socks with its branding on as an additional piece of merchandise to sell on the premises. "Or it could be a large event where the organisers want a practical and sustainable gift for a goody bag," adds Ciezka.

When it comes to inspiration, Ciezka says it's not hard to come by. "We genuinely obsess about Ireland so it's not that difficult; we might be queuing for bread and listening to the chat behind us."

Irish Socksciety has never compromised on its core values of sustainability, quality and community. On the community end, for example, it runs a campaign aimed at women called 'I'm perfect' (an antidote to the fact that so many women focus on what is 'imperfect' about them). Half the profits from those socks go to organisations supporting women in Ireland; last year €12,000 was donated.

Meanwhile, both Ciezka and Kieldanowicz are passionate about the Irish language and are keen to see it used in light-hearted ways. "It deserves a contemporary context, and if we can have a fun and vibrant business we would like to show that the language can exist in that kind of environment," says Ciezka.

www.irishsocksciety.com

A small price to pay

Understanding the struggles and needs of your target market is a big advantage when starting a business; the entrepreneurs behind Nanny Payroll knew them inside out

Anyone who needs the services of a childminder is unlikely to have oodles of spare time in which to grapple with accounting or tax rules. Hence they may be only too happy to hire someone to handle the payment of their childminder correctly – which is precisely where Nanny Payroll comes in.

Run by Jenny Diamond, her best friend Fiona Chandler and her sister Astrid Hamilton, the company takes care of payroll for anyone who employs a nanny in their home, ensuring for example that the correct tax reliefs are applied. The idea came about when Diamond's brother was hiring a nanny and wanted help with the accounts side of it. As an accountant by profession, she was easily able to lend a hand.

"Then I got talking to Astrid, who has a background in HR and children's policy, and Fiona, who is a tax manager. We thought that together we would have the skills to set something up," she says.

They also felt strongly that there was a

demand for this type of service. "All three of us are working parents and we know that you don't have time for these things. I read a survey that said the average working parent only has 32 minutes of free time a day," notes Diamond.

Opportunity to launch

In 2018, new legislation was introduced which required employers (parents, in the case of a nanny) to report every time they paid their nanny instead of just once a year. The trio took the opportunity to launch their company which, according to Diamond, has gone from strength to strength since.

More recently the business has started providing a similar service for those who employ a carer at home via the website www.carerpayroll.ie. This came about organically when people started approaching Nanny Payroll asking for the same help when paying carers.

Although in theory any accountant could do this service for a family, in practice families don't feel it's a big enough job to go to an accountant with. "Also, they can be put off by the fact that the pricing isn't clear, whereas we are upfront and have a fixed price on our website," adds Diamond.

The next 12 months will see the firm developing the carer arm of its business; Diamond says it has a lot of growth potential, particularly given the ageing population. She also plans to launch a 'minder finder' service over the next year or so, through which the business will be able to use its many contacts in the sector to help connect parents with minders.

"Families can be put off by accountants' unclear pricing, whereas we are upfront and have a fixed price on our website."



Fiona Chandler, Astrid Hamilton and Jenny Diamond, co-founders, Nanny Payroll

www.nannypayroll.ie



Sinead Hayes and Willie Keague, co-owners, Nationwide Safety Training Network

In safe hands

Excellent customer service and an abiding ‘can do’ attitude will stand any business in good stead – Nationwide Safety Training Network has them in spades

Sinead Hayes and Willie Keague showed huge resourcefulness when they got their company, Nationwide Safety Training Network, off the ground six years ago. The seeds of the venture were sown years earlier when the couple reassessed their work-life situation following Keague’s recovery from a rare and aggressive form of cancer.

“We realised that having the two of us in the rat race – getting up early and dropping the kids to crèche etc – just wouldn’t work,” says Hayes.

Keague had been working with Height for Hire as a salesman but had also regularly conducted training and demonstrated equipment. It was the aspect of his job he most enjoyed. At the same time Hayes was completing an MBA at Dublin City University and did her business plan on a training business.

With more than 100 distinct courses, the firm covers all mandatory safety training as well as supplementary training in the likes of fire or chemical safety. It delivers via a range of channels: its online

“We talk to our competitors at least once a week. If someone contacts us looking for information, we will freely give it.”

platform, at customers’ premises or in its training centre in Dunboyne, Co Meath.

With four full-time staff, Nationwide Safety Training Network brings in external trainers as needed and, although there are competitors of all shapes and sizes, it has carved out a niche. The company does plenty of ‘train the trainer’ type courses, meaning that many of its competitors are also its customers.

Spirit of collaboration

As Hayes explains, there is a strong spirit of collaboration in the industry. “We talk to every one of our competitors at least once a week. They might be running a course that we’re not running or they might book someone on one of our courses. If someone contacts us looking for information, we will freely give it; that karma comes back around.”

According to Keague, what sets the team apart is the fact that they “never say no” to a customer request for safety training. If they can’t do it, he says, they will point the customer in the right direction, even if it means sending them to a competitor.

“Other feedback from customers is that they are surprised how quickly we get back to them. We assumed our competitors were working on the same basis but it’s been said to us enough times now that we realise it’s a unique selling point of sorts.”

All told, says Keague, the company has experienced “spectacular” growth since its formation and he and Hayes are “quietly confident” that the company will continue on this trajectory in 2023.

www.nationwidesafetytraining.ie

Bridging a gap

By putting businesses in touch with precisely the kind of consultants they need at any given time, The Agile Executive is killing two birds with one stone

Having spent years in the corporate world, Tony Dignam decided in 2018 that it was time for a change. So he left his position as finance director at Compass Group Ireland, took a leap of faith and started working with clients on a part-time basis.

As he puts it, when starting out on your own like that you end up “having cups of coffee with everyone you’ve ever known”. It was during just such a meeting – with Paul McArdle from recruitment company The Panel – that the seeds of The Agile Executive were sown.

“Paul was seeing lots of people in their 50s and 60s who didn’t want to go back into the corporate world, but he didn’t have a solution for them,” says Dignam. On the other side of the equation, Dignam had been doing some research and found plenty of evidence that SMEs often lacked the financial acumen they needed to progress.

He and McArdle launched the service – now owned by Dignam – and never looked back. Initially they mainly provided ‘CFOs as a service’, but also

began to offer consultants across other disciplines such as sales and marketing.

Government supports for business introduced during the pandemic indirectly boosted The Agile Executive, which now has over 100 consultants on its books. It organises these consultants into teams where needed in order to help businesses in a multitude of areas – finance, of course, but also digital support, green initiatives and so on. It has managed all this with, up until recently, just one employee (there is now a second, part-time staff member).

Software platform

This year, Dignam is intent on getting software off the ground to help streamline the company’s offering. The new platform – Agile Connect – will make it even easier for small businesses to find the expertise they’re looking for. It will also solve a common problem for consultants.

“When working on something, consultants are often too busy to look for their next project,” he says. “So while they might be busy for a few months, they may then have nothing while they’re looking for their next piece of work.”

The software should make it simpler to tap into what is essentially an “online pipeline of opportunities and skillsets”, says Dignam, adding that it will also help the business move into the UK market.

Another significant item on the agenda for 2023 will be the rollout of a new internal audit solution for the non-profit space. Agile Internal Audit will bring organisations seeking a cost-effective solution to their internal audit needs together with the right people.

“The software should make it simpler to tap into what is essentially an online pipeline of opportunities and skillsets.”



Tony Dignam, managing director, The Agile Executive

www.theagileexecutive.ie

GOING THE DISTANCE

Employees of Irish SMEs are able to purchase three types of bikes and safety equipment ranging in value from €1,250 to €3,000 tax-free with Cyclescheme, writes Eimear Redmond, manager, field sales at the One4all Group

As Ireland continues to struggle with the cost-of-living crisis, finding ways of saving money and looking after one's wellbeing is pivotal for most employees. Workplaces are continuously trying to improve employee health and wellbeing and introducing the Cyclescheme benefit for your staff is a simple, effective way of contributing to that.

With warmer days ahead, it's the perfect time to rethink your commute. Opting to cycle creates both saving and health benefits. Do you need to purchase a new bike to get started?

One4all Rewards' Cyclescheme is an attractive solution, enabling employees to start cycling from €5 per month. Providing a range of options including traditional bikes, e-bikes or cargo bikes, and with the welcomed increase of up to €3,000 tax-free allowance for cargo bikes, it's a clever scheme to join.

Here are ten reasons for you or your employees to opt for a bike through Cyclescheme:

1 Save money

The cost of travelling to work by car or public transport can add up to be a substantial amount. With Cyclescheme, a traditional bike with associated equipment can be purchased for up to €1,250 free of any tax, PRSI, or USC, while an e-bike can be purchased for €1,500 and there is even a bigger saving for a cargo bike with purchases of up to €3,000 tax-free.

2 Improve your fitness levels

Choosing to cycle to work will improve your fitness levels. Exercise and fitness is crucial for a balanced lifestyle. For those taking on a new exercise regime for the first time such as going to the gym or running it can be daunting. Cycling is a proven 'low-impact' exercise on the body but is highly effective in reducing fat and increasing fitness and energy levels.

3 Enjoy yourself

In addition to the boost of endorphins from exercise, commuting on a bike is a more enjoyable way of getting to work than sitting in traffic and pulling your

"Cycling to and from work is a perfect way to occupy the mind away from over-thinking about work-related tasks and decompress."



hair out. Getting some fresh air, whizzing past traffic jams and admiring scenic routes will work a treat for your mind and body.

4 Nurture your wellbeing

Since the pandemic, there has been a spotlight on employee wellbeing. Cycling will help you to avoid traffic stress. People often complain about stress and 'switching off' from work. Cycling to and from work is a perfect way to occupy the mind away from over-thinking about work-related tasks and decompress in time for when you come home to friends and family.

5 Transport goods

Don't fret if you have heavy items to transport to work. You might think a car is the best option, but you can still cycle to work with a large number of items using a cargo bike. It's a human-powered vehicle designed and constructed specifically for transporting goods.

6 Go green

Climate change is an ongoing issue and vehicular transport is responsible for over 30% of greenhouse gas emissions in Ireland. Switching to a bike will help you play your part to fight climate change.

Choosing an e-bike is a fantastic, eco-friendly commuting alternative as its batteries can be easily recharged with renewable energy.

7 Cycle with ease

You might think cycling will mean a longer journey. However, the capabilities of e-bikes have improved massively in recent years. Thanks to advancements in technology, e-bike batteries can handle longer distances without running out of energy. So, it's the perfect commuting option as your e-bike will take you the distance you need to go.

8 Keep a suitable pace

If you've experienced injuries or your fitness levels have dipped an e-bike is the perfect way to start cycling. An e-bike caters for all abilities so you can ride at an impressive speed, regardless of the weather or terrain conditions. It's also a great way to get involved with group cycling without worrying about your fitness levels.

9 Make your own schedule

Commuters are always challenged with transport delays that are out of their control. Commuting by bike, whether it's with a cargo, traditional or e-bike, means

"Signing up to Cyclescheme gives you the option to purchase your bicycle and equipment from over 300 bike stores across the country."

that you can set off during a time that works for you without being restricted by public transport schedules, delays or roadworks. You also never have to worry about queuing in a petrol station to fill up your car.

10 Plenty of options

There is such an extensive range of bikes available including models for all abilities and styles for personal preference. Signing up to Cyclescheme gives you the option to purchase your bicycle and equipment from over 300 bike stores across the country.

For more information, email info@cyclescheme.ie



Pauline, Joseph and Karen Burke, dealer principals, JJ Burke Car Sales

Driven to success

JJ Burke Car Sales has been supplying top-quality cars and vans to both private and commercial customers in the west of Ireland for almost 50 years

JJ Burke Car Sales was established by JJ and Helena Burke in Ballinrobe, Co Mayo in 1974. Their adult children James, Karen and Pauline are now in charge of the business as sales manager, business manager and after-sales manager, respectively – all striving to give a “hospitality experience for everyone that walks through the door”.

In addition to sourcing and selling new and used vehicles, the company also offers a full-service, repair, bodyshop, tyre management and valeting service to customers.

Originally based on Abbey Street in the town, the business moved to a new purpose-built facility on the Claremorris Road in 1985. Two years later it took on the Austin Rover agency for the western region before securing the prestigious Peugeot dealership in 1989. When the Izuzu dealership was added in 1997 total sales reached 90 new vehicles and 250 used vehicles per annum. The next few years saw strong growth as annual new and used vehicle sales reached 250 and 300, respectively, by 2005.

The addition of the Renault and Dacia

“We’re a family-run business operating at the heart of the community offering a complete range of services to our customers.”

dealerships in January 2013 marked another watershed in the company’s progress. Staff numbers increased to 40 following the construction of a new purpose-built Renault and Peugeot showroom at the Claremorris Road site. Vehicle turnover has since increased to around 750 new and 900 used car and van sales per annum.

Comprehensive service

“We’re a family-run business operating at the heart of the community offering a complete range of services to our customers to cover all their motoring needs,” Joseph Burke explains. “We provide everything from top-end, new cars to more affordable new and second-hand models to suit every budget. We also provide finance options where required and a full vehicle management after-sales service for both private owners and commercial customers with large fleets.”

Joseph attributes much of the credit for the company’s success over the years to its staff and expects the growth of the business to continue for some time yet.

“The majority of our staff have been with us for many years and their expertise and strong customer focus has played a major part in getting us to where we are today,” he says. “We have allocated significant investment for a new workshop facility to meet increased after-sales demand. We are also planning to extend our Peugeot showroom,” he says.

Another area of continued investment will be the electric vehicle market where demand has soared over the past few years. The company won the 2023 ZEV Electric Vehicle Dealership of the Year award for the Connacht region.

Shop around the corner

Growing and changing with the times, McGuirk’s Centra has been an integral part of the Blackcastle community in Co Meath for almost 20 years

Marie Therese and Sean McGuirk took over the running of what was then a small local grocery store on the outskirts of Navan back in 2004. The Celtic Tiger was in full swing and the town was expanding rapidly with plenty of local industry and proximity to Dublin making it one of the fastest-growing urban centres in Europe at the time.

Fast forward almost 20 years and both the town and the store have continued to thrive. Initially employing five people, the store now has 30 members of staff with the next generation of the McGuirk family now actively involved in the business.

A major expansion in 2011 saw the store size increase to 4,600 sq ft. The range on offer increased significantly to include extensive fresh meat, deli and bakery lines. With a strong reputation for fresh food and open seven days a week, McGuirk’s Centra is now firmly established as a one-stop shopping destination for the Blackcastle area and beyond.

“We are well-positioned which means

“We are well-positioned which means we get good footfall throughout the day. There is plenty of employment nearby and we get a good passing trade.”

we get good footfall throughout the day,” explains Marie Therese. “There is plenty of employment nearby and we get a good passing trade as well. We are situated close to the local school which also helps a lot, so it is always busy early in the morning, at lunchtime and after school closes.”

Purchasing power

As part of the Musgrave Group which includes both the Centra and SuperValu chains, the Blackcastle store enjoys the benefit of its significant purchasing power across a whole range of product lines. It also buys bread, cakes and other value-added items from local producers, a policy that shows its commitment to the community and determination to support local enterprise where possible. The store also sponsors local GAA, arts and a wide range of other community-based activities.

The Covid-19 pandemic proved a significant challenge for the store as schools and business premises closed and footfall reduced significantly – but the McGuirk’s adapted.

“We responded by increasing our fresh food output which proved a real hit with customers and actually brought a lot of new people into the store as word spread. We also introduced a delivery service for the elderly and more vulnerable within the community which is still up and running,” says Marie Therese.

“You can’t stand still for long in this industry or you’ll be left behind. We are currently working on reducing packaging where possible as part of our sustainability drive and have invested heavily in digital systems throughout the store to reduce energy consumption and costs.”



Marie Therese and Sean McGuirk of McGuirk’s Centra Blackcastle



James Nolan, owner, Nolan's of Kilcullen

Improving with age

International award-winning master butchers Nolan's of Kilcullen is one of the few remaining farm-to-fork craft food producers in the country

James Nolan is the fourth generation of the family to run Nolan's of Kilcullen in the centre of the picturesque town. Located on Main Street close to the banks of the Liffey and just a few miles from the Curragh, it was founded in 1886 by his great grandfather and great uncle whose vision of showcasing top-quality local produce remains at the heart of the operation today.

Nolan's of Kilcullen employs 29 full-time staff between the shop, farm and processing unit. The total supply chain is all managed under one roof and carefully monitored at every stage of the process to ensure top-quality, fully-traceable fresh produce every time.

"We have our own unique farm-to-fork story which enables us to mature our locally-sourced beef in the old-fashioned way. Our skillful butchers take the stress away from our customers by offering many recipe options and customising cuts of meat," says Nolan. "Enhancing the customer's shopping experience by providing friendly and professional service is central to our success."

To supplement the beef, pork and lamb produced from its own farm, the company also buys in complementary lines. These include cheeses, jams, chutneys and fish from local producers for its dedicated deli counter along with wine and other items to make it a one-stop shop for discerning customers looking to create a great dining experience.

Enduring passion

Supported by wife Emma, Nolan remains as passionate about the business today as he was when he first took it over back in 2002. "I was inspired by the business and watching my father work from a very young age," he explains.

"It's all I've ever wanted to do. We are very much embedded in the community and are constantly working on developing new lines and variants to meet changing customer tastes. It's an exciting challenge which I look forward to every day."

Nolan's of Kilcullen's continuing emphasis on innovation and a keen customer focus is reflected in the number of awards the business has won over the years. Most recent among these were the national Best Sausage and Best New Meat Product gongs at the 2023 Irish Craft Butchers Awards in January. The latter was awarded for its unique breakfast roll comprising Nolan's traditional sausage with chopped smoked bacon, homemade cranberry black pudding and homemade white pudding in a pastry-covered roulade.

Nolan's of Kilcullen also won the International Outstanding Achievement Award at last year's IFFA World Food Fair in Frankfurt, Germany for winning eight gold medals in World Craft Butcher competitions over the years.

Nolan's of Kilcullen is also shortlisted in the Food & Drink category

"We are embedded in the community and constantly working on developing new lines and variants to meet changing customer tastes."

www.nolansofkilcullen.com

Sculpted to perfection

The Sculpted by Aimee range of cosmetics continues to earn rave reviews as a top-quality make-up brand at an affordable price for consumers of all ages

Make-up artist Aimee Connolly's vision when she founded Sculpted by Aimee in 2016 was to create top-end, easy-to-use cosmetic products at an affordable price for the Irish market. Having worked on TV and print projects along with weddings and other special events, she was passionate about make-up in all its forms. She felt that Irish consumers were missing out and set out to fill that gap.

Now employing 30 full-time staff, Sculpted by Aimee has enjoyed phenomenal growth over the past few years. The brand's range now includes more than 300 line and size variants for skin, complexion, eyes, cheeks and lips along with face and body bronzers plus a wide array of brushes, make-up bags and other accessories.

Available online and in stores throughout Ireland including Brown Thomas, Dunnes Stores, Boots and Arnotts – as well as the company's own flagship outlet on Grafton Street – the range launched in the UK last year where it is currently listed in over 100 Boots stores nationwide.

All products are manufactured in South Korea, the acknowledged global leader in skincare technology, and are marketed

"All reviews are carefully monitored to ensure that we are meeting customer expectations at all times. We are that passionate."

under the Sculpted by Aimee brand, with retail currently accounting for 60% of sales and online 40%.

The company also operates its own make-up academy which offers both online and in-class courses and tutorials for beginners right up to professional make-up artist accreditation standard.

Leveraging loyalty

Customer loyalty has played a huge role in the company's success to date as consumers have fully embraced the concept of a top-quality brand for all ages created by a professional with a deep understanding of products and their potential.

"Social media has been pivotal for us in helping to build closer links with our customers and get a better understanding of what they want," explains marketing manager Nimah Kuzbari White. "It's a two-way conversation which is great for building customer loyalty and brand awareness."

The product development team works closely with dermatologists and other skincare experts and conducts regular visits to South Korea to monitor production processes and test potential new lines. "We are committed to ensuring that all of our products are vegan-friendly and free from animal cruelty, so achieving certification to the Leaping Bunny standard last year was a proud moment for us," notes White.

With a constant stream of new product releases set for the remainder of the year, there is little time for complacency. "All reviews are carefully monitored to ensure that we are meeting customer expectations at all times," says White. "We are that passionate and we want to be the best."



Aimee Connolly, founder, Sculpted by Aimee

www.sculptedbyaimee.com

Staying on trend

Grace Reed and Karen Dempsey established online make-up and beauty store TRNDBTY to make hard-to-get international beauty brands more accessible to Irish shoppers

Working in the make-up and beauty industry was something that had always appealed to Grace Reed and Karen Dempsey and in 2015 they finally decided to take the plunge. Reed, a qualified food scientist, was on maternity leave and leaning towards a career change, while Dempsey had worked as a beauty therapist and make-up artist and was keen to start her own business.

TRNDBTY offers a complete range of hair, make-up, fragrance, skincare and tanning products to a steadily expanding female and male customer base.

With over 3,000 Irish and international brands currently on its books – many of which are exclusive to the company – TRNDBTY now processes around 9,500 orders annually with free postage on all purchases over €50 for Irish customers.

The company employs six full-time staff across its customer service and warehouse management functions, with all products dispatched from a dedicated facility in



Grace Reed and Karen Dempsey, co-founders, TRNDBTY

Carlow. International brands are mainly sourced from the US and the UK, with LA Girl, J.Cat Beauty (both US) and IsoClean (UK) amongst the most popular ranges.

Simple process

“Our primary goal from the beginning was to make the purchasing process as simple as possible for customers looking to source the international brands they were seeing every day on social media,” explains Reed.

“That meant creating a quick and easy shopping experience with prompt delivery guaranteed each and every time. It also meant managing all customs payment requirements for each transaction as that can be a significant deterrent for many customers, something that has become even more important post Brexit.”

“Building trust with both customers and suppliers is crucial in this business, particularly when launching new product lines.”

TRNDBTY thrived during the pandemic as order rates soared. “We managed to maintain supply of all stock items which was a great achievement and sales peaked at around €70,000 per month at the time,” Reed says. That has reduced somewhat since then with increased competition from re-opened retail stores. One of the key goals for the immediate future is try to hit those heights again.

The average order value is currently €40 which Reed hopes to grow significantly by driving brand awareness via pop-up shops and other events, creating more enticing product-box combinations and other sales and marketing initiatives.

The company has a loyal customer base with 30% of all sales currently coming from repeat purchases. “Building trust with both customers and suppliers is crucial in this business, particularly when launching new product lines, so it is great to have such a high repeat-customer rate which will hopefully underpin our growth going forward,” says Reed.

“Our aim is to achieve €40,000 turnover per month by the end of this year and €60,000 per month by the end of 2024.”

www.TRNDBTY.com

Are you the Best Small Business in Ireland?

The 2024 the National Small Business Awards will launch again in September. If you would like to see yourself featured in this supplement next year visit www.sfaawards.ie to explore all categories and see our previous winners.

ALLEVIATING PRESSURE

In the face of cash-flow concerns, Sage is committed to supporting its customers and partners in digitising their businesses and becoming more productive and resilient

New analysis from Sage, in partnership with Smart Data Foundry (SDF), has assessed the impact of late payments on the cash flow of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), including micro companies, in the UK and Ireland. Around 58 million anonymous sales invoices between 2010 and 2021 from more than 100,000 Sage SME customers were analysed.

The analysis revealed that 40% of all payments to the SME customers in the sample are late with the average amount owed being £22,000 (around €24,787). However, the problem of late payments to micro businesses and SMEs has significantly improved in terms of the time companies wait to be paid, falling by over 50% from an average of 81 days in 2010 to 36 days in 2020/21.

“The improvement in payment times can be attributed to the positive impact of technology and the digitalisation of the invoice payment process,” says a Sage spokesperson.

“Late payments still present real and immediate problems for SMEs as cash flow and strong liquidity are vital to survival and growth in the current climate of high inflation, rising interest rates and volatile costs.”

Breaking down barriers

The Sage research has identified cost as the most significant barrier to SMEs investing in technology, with 41% concerned about adopting new technology due to cash-flow pressure and 24% unsure of the return on investment.

The second biggest barrier is awareness, with 34% of SMEs stating they're unaware of which solution is right for them. Almost a third of those surveyed say that training staff on new processes and breaking habits also present issues.

“SMEs must prioritise investment in digital tools to successfully mitigate against macroeconomic challenges. Over nine in ten [92%] businesses state



that technology is important to their survival and growth and 88% say it is key to business resilience,” the spokesperson says.

A landmark Sage study of 5,000 SMEs in the UK called Digital Britain shows that 62% of businesses surveyed in that market are using technology to cut costs and better compete for hard-pressed customers (68%).

According to this study, conducted in 2022, use of technology by SMEs contributes £216bn to the UK economy; but if SMEs unlock the full benefits of technology, this could add an extra £232bn.

All Sage solutions have cash-flow

capability. The company's aim is to make it easy as possible for SMEs to do business digitally and adopt technology that will unlock productivity and give them the insights to adapt and grow quicker.

Continually evolving

Driven by customer feedback and incorporating the latest advancements in technology, Sage continually evolves its products to better suit the way SMEs run their business. They also make them more robust, secure and easy to use.

In recent months, it has worked on some new capabilities and experience improvements that all Sage Business Cloud customers now have access to. Supporting SME resilience and growth is the main driver behind the updates and enhancements that have been made.

For example, Sage Business Cloud Accounting now includes purchase automation to help you to digitalise and automate low-value, high-impact tasks. This automatically pulls data from your purchase invoices and receipt images and creates digital records of them. This helps you to track expenses and gives you a true view of cash flow.

Following the introduction of statutory sick pay in Ireland on 1 January, Sage Business Cloud Payroll now includes functionality that enables Irish businesses to easily process these payments. Another new feature is the ability to add a holiday payment for both hourly and salaried employees when processing a pay run, giving everyone

“The improvement in payment times can be attributed to the positive impact of technology and the digitalisation of the invoice payment process.”

more visibility of their earnings.

Sage customers get more than just software to support them with the many challenges facing them in the current climate. They automatically become members of the Sage community, allowing them to tap into exclusive benefits.

These include award-winning support, talks and articles from the world's leading experts and community forums where they can connect with other similar businesses. In addition to this, the Sage Business Cloud customer support team has increased by 36% since March 2022.

“With the right supports, policies and incentives in place and support from the Government, SMEs will unleash their full potential and play a vital role in economic recovery and sustained long-term growth,” says the spokesperson.





Conor Morley, managing director, WWS Ireland

Boosting yields

WWS Ireland supplies products and expertise to over 2,000 farmers nationwide which help them to maximise the quality and yields from their herds

Based in Little Island, Co Cork, WWS (World Wide Sire) Ireland is part of the WWS worldwide group of companies that was formed in California back in 1971 by well-known dairyman and cattle breeder Bill Clark.

The Irish branch of the business was established in July 2016. Initially employing five staff, that number has now grown to 22 as more farmers and cattle breeders have become aware of the significant benefits of using WWS genetic products to improve the quality and potential yields of their herds.

With a suite of internationally-recognised products and a highly-experienced expert team at its disposal, WWS Ireland offers a complete herd management service to its clients. It is the exclusive Irish distributor of the patented CowManager herd monitoring system which is sold in 42 countries worldwide.

Using ear sensors, CowManager provides real-time information on a herd's health, fertility and nutritional status with a built-in early warning capability to identify at-risk animals. The system is available as a mobile app or computer desktop installation, giving

“The payback timeline for investment in CowManager is around 24 months, while the potential return for using our genetic solutions is significantly higher.”

farmers 24/7 access to information and can be used to monitor herd wellbeing from anywhere in the world.

CowManager's health module facilitates quick diagnosis of diseases such as mastitis, milk fever and lameness, while the nutrition module advises on optimal feeding times and mixes to combat heat stress and other issues. Meanwhile, the fertility module quickly identifies peak and silent heats, pregnant animals and abortions to maximise mating season comfort and productivity.

Customised plan

In addition to CowManager, WWS Ireland also uses the latest genomic technology to provide top-quality sire bulls that are proven to perform in Irish conditions. Each bull is selected based on an individually-customised plan tailored to the unique requirements of the customer. The technology offers farmers a quicker and more cost-effective route to improving the quality of their herds.

“With pressure on to lower carbon emissions across the agricultural sector, there has been plenty of talk about the need to reduce herd sizes where possible, so it makes sense for farmers to harness the latest genetic technology to maximise their yields going forward,” explains Conor Morley, the company's managing director.

“Results have shown that the payback timeline for investment in CowManager is around 24 months, while the potential return for using our genetic solutions is significantly higher.”

Morley expects WWS Ireland to grow significantly over the next two years as demand for its solutions increases. “In the meantime we will keep investing in new ways of improving our service offering. We will also explore new product options to help both our customers and the environment,” he adds.

www.wwsireland.com

On the move

Jones International Transport is a leading provider of specialised, temperature-controlled transport and logistics services between Ireland, the UK and mainland Europe

Based in north Dublin, close to the airport and within easy reach of Dublin Port, Jones International Transport is very much a family-owned and run operation. Current managing director Keith Jones is the second generation of the family to work there, following in the footsteps of his father Nicholas Jones Sr. who established the business in 1995.

The company has grown significantly over the past few years and now employs 42 personnel, mostly drivers, all of whom are qualified in good distribution practice and for the transport of dangerous goods (ADR). Jones International has achieved ISO 9001:2015 and ISO 14000 certification.

Its main business is within the pharmaceutical and life sciences sectors. Customers include such blue-chip names as Pfizer, Janssen, Abbott Laboratories, Beckman Coulter, Bausch & Lomb and BioMarin. More recently it has added a number of tech companies to its client list including Amazon, Facebook and Microsoft.

Equipped with GSM mobile phones and satellite tracking systems for real-time monitoring of load status and location, the hi-tech Jones International Transport fleet comprises 34 trucks and 50 trailers

“The average lifespan of a vehicle in our industry is around five years, so there is a constant cycle of investment and re-investment.”

which require ongoing investment to ensure they are compliant with relevant standards.

Modern fleet

“The average lifespan of a vehicle in our industry is around five years, so there is a constant cycle of investment and re-investment to make sure we have the most modern fleet possible,” Jones explains. “We also have a stringent preventative maintenance and testing programme in place to eliminate potential errors and ensure customer supply chain integrity at all times.”

Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have all posed significant challenges for the business, but Jones is confident for the future and is already planning the next stage of the company's development via a five-year strategic plan.

The initial phase of that plan involves the opening of a new 20,000 sq ft, high-bay logistics facility on a four-acre site in Balbriggan. Work on the project is expected to be completed within 36 months. That will be followed by the construction of a dedicated cold and ambient product pick-and-pack warehousing facility of a similar size on the same site specifically for pharmaceutical customers.

“The market is changing and, with guarantee of supply so crucial due to a combination of outside influences, we feel this will provide a valuable service to our customer base,” says Jones. “In the meantime, we are working towards achieving the ISO 50001 energy management standard and are examining ways of reducing our carbon emissions by more than 50% over the next four years through use of HVO and CNG fuel alternatives where appropriate.”



Keith Jones, managing director, Jones International Transport

www.jonesinternational.ie



Johnny Madden, mechanical project manager and Gary O'Sullivan, managing director, OSENG

A team effort

Repeat business has been central to the growth of OSENG, which is focused on making the welfare and development of its people a priority

Gary O'Sullivan founded OSENG in 2018 with the aim of improving the design side of pharmaceutical construction projects and filling a gap he identified for engineering consultancy in the west of Ireland. Last year, the Mayo-based firm worked on 30 new projects varying in scale and complexity and over 90% of its turnover is repeat business.

"Clients are coming to us requesting us to do more work for them and word of mouth has been powerful. We have commenced a number of key projects for our existing clients and some new clients in recent months. With those key awards it has allowed us to plan for growth into the future and projects outside of Ireland," says O'Sullivan.

"Our success has been based on delivering projects for our clients when we state we would and maintaining quality in service delivery at all times. This is our most successful marketing strategy and is the basis of our success along with the hard work of our team."

"Our success has been based on delivering projects for our clients when we state we would and maintaining quality in service delivery."

While the life sciences sector continues to account for a substantial proportion of its work, OSENG has also been doing a lot in the logistics space. For example, it recently completed a new LEED Gold standard building for a long-term client, DB Schenker.

"Sustainability has become a big focus for us. We advise clients on how to get in front and make the transitions needed," notes O'Sullivan. "I have taken on the role of vice president of ASHRAE Ireland Chapter and have been heavily involved in looking at the route to net zero emissions by 2050."

Work-life balance

Currently employing a team of ten directly and, project-dependent, 15 additional subject-matter experts, O'Sullivan forecasts an increase in his workforce to around 20 people by the end of this year.

He believes getting the work-life balance right is key to attracting and retaining talent: "We put our staff welfare first, offering flexible working hours, a hybrid workplace, education support and additional days off for employee appreciation. We made the transition to staff working a nine-day fortnight in 2022. Working hours have been extended by half an hour over the nine days and everyone has every second Friday off," he explains.

"Upskilling is an area we put a lot of investment into. While we know that our employees may change job in the future, we want them to be ahead of all of our competitors in expertise while they work for OSENG."

OSENG is also shortlisted in the Workplace Wellbeing category

Rent a Recruiter is also shortlisted in the Workplace Wellbeing category

Reviving recruitment

From humble beginnings in an attic room in 2018, Rent a Recruiter is already making big noises in the international recruitment market

After working in international recruitment for many years, Barry Prost and Jamie Groom felt the traditional industry model was badly in need of a shake-up. Together they founded Rent a Recruiter, a talent acquisition provider with a difference, to offer a unique, new service to customers whose recruitment needs they felt were not being adequately met.

"We felt the system was broken, with little or no value for either the client or the recruitment agency," explains Prost, the company's chair and chief strategy officer. "We decided to disrupt the industry by changing the proposition and offering something that hadn't been available before."

The Rent a Recruiter model is different to that traditionally used across the sector as agents work as an extension of the client HR team. "We offer an embedded service which means our agents work more closely with clients and, therefore, develop a deeper knowledge of their individual requirements," says Prost.

"Results prove that this shortens candidate-search timelines, ensures greater

accuracy and, therefore, reduces costs for our clients who have ready access to our experience and expertise. The model is completely flexible and can be scaled up or down to match their requirements, which makes it suitable for customer organisations of all sizes."

The payment system is also different to the industry norm in that clients pay a flat monthly subscription fee, with no additional payments required upon successful candidate placement. Overall, Prost believes this offers a better than 50% saving compared to the traditional industry model.

People and growth

Rent a Recruiter currently employs 20 full-time staff, all of whom work remotely. Turnover exceeded €3m in 2022 and is expected to grow significantly again this year. In addition to Ireland, it is already firmly established in the international arena, with business in Europe, the Middle East, Australia and, most recently, the US. It won the Employment and Recruitment Federation Agency of the Year Award in the medium-sized category in 2022.

When it comes to its own staff's wellbeing, Rent a Recruiter has taken tangible action and is already reaping the rewards. Employees work four days a week and have access to a wellness app 24/7 which monitors health and offers advice.

"We value our people and give them plenty of autonomy as well," notes Prost. "Productivity is up 50% per employee and we have a 100% rate of staff retention which is a huge boost to our growth plans as we look to expand further into the international arena over the next few years."

"The model is completely flexible and can be scaled up or down, which makes it suitable for customer organisations of all sizes."



The Rent a Recruiter team

EMPOWERING EXPORTERS

The appetite to export and achieve global scale continues to prevail among Irish companies, which demonstrate strength and resilience in dealing with economic challenges, writes Enda McDonnell, regional director for Dublin, Enterprise Ireland

Supporting Irish-owned companies to achieve greater scale and expand their global footprint is a priority for Enterprise Ireland in 2023 and we are committed to supporting Irish companies on their journey to becoming global leaders in their field.

All global markets – whether it's the UK, the US, the Eurozone or elsewhere – are of strategic importance for Enterprise Ireland client companies, as they present a range of exciting potential opportunities for Irish businesses.

Irish enterprises are exporting to an increasingly diversified set of global markets and the companies that we are proud to work with continue to demonstrate real resilience in the face of the lingering effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, inflation, economic uncertainty and global supply chain disruptions.

Growth and opportunities

Despite the ongoing global challenges, Enterprise Ireland client companies created 19,660 new jobs in 2022, with particularly strong growth in the technology and services sector. This growth translates into a net increase of 10,841 jobs created in the businesses we supported last year.

Companies supported by Enterprise Ireland now employ 218,178 people across the country, an increase of 5% on the 2021 outturn. Employment increased across Enterprise Ireland's three core economic sectors; Technology & Services (+8%), Industrial and Life Sciences (+5%) and Food and Sustainability (+3%).

“Enterprise Ireland client companies created 19,660 new jobs in 2022, with particularly strong growth in the technology and services sector.”

Exports from Irish companies supported by Enterprise Ireland increased by 12% in 2021 to a total of €27.292bn. This represents the highest-ever level of exports in value terms, with increases across almost all sectors and territories. The UK, for example, increased by 15%, while exports to the Eurozone from companies we support rose by 10%.

Challenges in the global economy have undoubtedly been a cause for concern



Leo Clancy, CEO, Enterprise Ireland speaking at International Markets Week

for many in recent months, but despite this, the majority of companies remain confident they will increase exports in 2023.

Forward planning

For any companies asking or considering if they can explore new exporting opportunities in the face of current economic headwinds, the answer is yes. The key to this is planning and research. Diversification can be important for many businesses and – with teams at home and overseas working collaboratively with companies – Enterprise Ireland has a suite of capability, financial and development supports available to help make this ambition a reality.

Irish enterprises are rarely complacent. They are strategic in the face of prevailing

headwinds, and this is key as proper planning can help businesses to remain confident.

Every market presents different opportunities, and Enterprise Ireland works with Irish companies to identify where the potential exists for them and how best to approach it.

Entering any new market or scaling in an existing one requires time, investment and patience. It needs a whole-of-company approach to ensure a business can undertake international activities in a sustainable way.

Appetite to export

Enterprise Ireland held a week-long event focused on international markets late last year. At the event, Irish companies and entrepreneurs had the opportunity

to engage in one-to-one meetings with our team of market advisors from our network of 40 international offices to discuss and explore new international exporting opportunities.

These meetings were practical and action-oriented, complementing ongoing engagement with the companies on their exporting journeys.

The appetite to export and explore new opportunities amongst our client companies that attended International Markets Week was strong. Results of a survey of companies taken ahead of their attending this event found that 84% of exporters planned to enter new international markets over the following 12 months.

“Results of a survey found that 84% of exporters planned to enter new international markets over the following 12 months.”

The majority (91%) of those surveyed anticipated growth in 2023. Of those planning to enter new international markets, one-third said North America was the priority market for them in 2023, with 27% prioritising Europe and one-in-five (19%) citing the UK.

Comprehensive support

In order to succeed in international markets, companies should do comprehensive research to ensure they have all the necessary fundamentals in place. Enterprise Ireland looks to support companies across their business plan and provide financial and non-financial (capability and development) supports in that context.

We seek to support companies across six key pillars: Strategy, Innovation, Operations, Sales and Marketing and Finance and People. And all of these pillars need to be captured in an overall strategy. If the “north star” of any company is international scale, the strategy will outline the roadmap towards this.

Enterprise Ireland client companies play a vital role in the Irish economy, employing more than 218,000 people in cities, towns and villages throughout the country and making an enormous contribution to local economies. As exports increase, so will the economic impacts, and we are here to support Irish businesses on that journey.



Ciarán Gorman,
group CFO and
Darren Fenton,
COO, Bevcraft

A can-do attitude

Bevcraft has expanded its mobile canning, decoration and can distribution services across Ireland, the UK, the Netherlands, Belgium and Norway and exports to 12 other countries

In December 2022, Bevcraft completed a merger transaction with Norway's Heidrun Tapperi, a leading craft can business in the Nordics. This expands the company's international sales presence in Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland.

In 2023 Bevcraft expects over 75% of sales to come from international markets and exports. Over the past few years, the company has handled over a 100 million cans for thousands of different products across different sizes, branding type and beverage style. "In January alone we fulfilled orders for markets as diverse as Iceland, Iraq and Portugal," notes chief financial officer Ciarán Gorman who established the business with his friend Darren Fenton in 2016 as a 'craft can' specialist.

Bevcraft's main service is to send its circa 20 mobile canning lines and crews into craft breweries to convert tanks of beer into cans, ready for supermarket shelves and off-licences.

In March 2022, Bevcraft acquired the business of Them that Can in the UK, greatly expanding its mobile canning

"Our growth focus remains on international markets and we will make future investments in the coming year to expand our footprint."

business and making it the largest mobile canner in Europe. In the same month, Bevcraft was one of just four Irish companies to make the FT1000 Fastest Growing Companies in Europe list.

Further to commissioning cutting-edge technology at its UK site in October 2021, Bevcraft is now operating the only commercial direct-to-can digital printing service in Europe, adds Gorman. "The Tonejet Cyclone technology allows us to print in smaller volumes directly onto the can, which eliminates the need for craft beverage producers to use plastic sleeves and labels."

Ongoing expansion

The 10,000 sq ft digital can printing plant in Peterborough features complete end-to-end automation, including robotic arms, depalletisers, repalletisers, print engines, primer stations and extensive conveyance and extraction infrastructure. To date, Bevcraft has invested a total of €5m in the UK and is currently the largest craft can business in that market.

Bevcraft's new beverage innovation centre at its Mullingar, Co Westmeath base opened in Q4, 2022 and is now supporting a wider range of beverage producers both in their own efforts to export and for international clients seeking to base production in Ireland.

On track to exceed 40 employees by the end of this year, Bevcraft's mobile canning service now offers coverage across Ireland, the UK, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Norway and parts of France and Germany, while the can distribution and decoration divisions now have the capability to export to all markets across Europe.

"Our growth focus remains on international markets and we will make future investments in the coming year to expand our footprint and export reach further," notes Gorman.

Success from the seashore

Building on a rich heritage in seaweed bathing from its base in Co Sligo, Voya has evolved to become a global lifestyle brand that specialises in sustainable, organic luxury

In 2006, Mark and Kira Walton decided to trade in their corporate careers in Dublin for the quieter pace of life in Sligo. Initially they joined the family business, which is a traditional seaweed bathing house owned by Mark's brother Neil Walton.

The couple began Voya as a business two years later focused on the sustainable, hand-harvesting of seaweed for the creation of products for the spa industry. "From the beginning the strategy has always been to keep the tradition going and take this Irish brand out into the world. Among the first business secured was in the United Arab Emirates and Voya has now gone into almost 50 countries," says general manager Paul Cameron.

"We have been very intentional with our growth strategy, targeting key cities in key locations with the highest-profile spa and retail businesses. We have around 1,500 points of sale now around the world while our online sales direct to consumers have been growing incrementally as we have added dedicated UK, US and European websites," adds chief sales and marketing

officer Serina Sandhu.

"Every year we focus on adding more countries. A lot of work goes into the requirements and logistics involved in each market. In some it is essential to have a distributor but we have been moving more towards setting up our own subsidiaries with our own sales and marketing teams on the ground. This gives us complete control and allows us to relay the authentic Voya story as we know it firsthand."

Compelling story

Sustainability is a big part of this story. Voya was the first sustainable, organic seaweed brand to be certified in the world. "When we talk about the 300-year old seaweed bathing tradition in Ireland people in other markets are amazed by it. They also love the fact that is a hands-on business with products fully-created from seaweed from the Wild Atlantic Way," notes Sandhu.

An important aspect of Voya's international success is the fact that it has its own training academy for therapists. For example, it recently became the only beauty brand to offer oncology training certified by governing body CIBTAC.

"Our ethos is to be inclusive so we focus on training and adjusting protocols so that anyone coming into a spa can be treated using our products," says Sandhu. "We recently launched an education platform around the menopause, which has already been taken up by 70% of our clients."

Now employing 43 people in Ireland and overseas, Voya plans to add at least another three to four countries to its fast-growing global footprint this year.

"From the beginning the strategy has always been to keep the tradition going and take this Irish brand out into the world."

Paul Cameron, general manager, Voya





David O'Reilly, ZEUS, Dan Barry, Enterprise Ireland, Damian Young, ZEUS, Stephen Burdock and Elliot Griffin, BVP

Micromobility mover

ZEUS Scooters has grown rapidly in the past two years with its forward-thinking approach that is improving the quality of life of commuters in cities in eight countries

Damian Young came up with the idea for ZEUS in 2019 after observing how micromobility was helping to improve the carbon footprint of cities while working around the world for a banking software company for five years.

Having designed the world's first three-wheeled e-scooter, ZEUS launched in Heidelberg, Germany in June 2020 with 50 scooters. Now, it has over 7,000 vehicles in eight countries and 60 cities globally.

"Our strategy has been to go into second- and third-tier cities. We started in Germany as it had the proper legislation and the concept of micromobility was already established in larger cities such as Berlin and Frankfurt," says Young.

"I started out in Ireland talking to large corporates who said they would love to have fleets of scooters to replace the many taxis their employees took each day to meetings. But I hit a brick wall as there was no legislation to cover micromobility in Ireland with e-scooters classed as mechanically-propelled vehicles requiring a licence, tax and insurance.

"However, the necessary legislation has now been passed here which should see ZEUS scooters on Irish roads by the summer."

"We now have a core product that works well with 7,000 vehicles and nearly half a million customers so far."

Technological triumph

ZEUS holds the rights of the design of its three-wheeled scooter with a dedicated manufacturer in China producing it to specification. As well as incorporating GPS technology, ZEUS has designed its own app which allows the user to unlock the scooter, ride it to work or wherever they want to go within a city or town and then leave it there.

"We have designed our own Internet of Things technology, which is effectively the brain of the scooter. The reason we did this was so we could enhance functionality, for example by developing pavement detection and the ability to reduce the scooter's speed in certain areas," Young explains.

Regarding sustainability, ZEUS is doing much more than helping to decongest cities with its environmentally-friendly scooters. "We have calculated that the amount of rides done on our scooters equates to a very significant reduction in carbon emissions," says Young.

"On top of this, our workshops are all solar-powered and we were commissioned by two cities to roll out solar-powered scooter stations, which allow 40 scooters to be charged every 24 hours."

Employing around 43 people globally, including 13 at its base in Kildavin, Co Carlow, ZEUS has been funded by private capital from the start and Young believes it can grow organically to scale from here. "We now have a core product that works well with nearly half a million customers so far," he says.

ZEUS is also shortlisted in the Sustainability and Innovator of the Year categories

Race against time

Having secured significant investment in the past year, Equine MediRecord is making its mark at horseracing and other equestrian events internationally with its innovative solution

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

"We've made big progress in securing more contracts in the past year, such as our first British Classic race, the Preakness Stakes in Maryland, part of the US Triple Crown, and most recently securing a contract to do the veterinary clearances for the Grand National in the UK," says Pierce Dargan.

"We also secured contracts outside of racing. Our system is being used by the Maryland 5 Star for example, one of only seven 5 Star events globally, representing the top equestrian competitors."

Equine MediRecord has developed, sells and maintains a mobile application and website to allow for the proper recording of medicines administered to horses and other bloodstock that is mandated under regulation. The solution has proven to reduce time spent on regulatory

documentation by up to 50% and ensure complete compliance when inspected by regulators.

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

So far Equine MediRecord has been licensed by regulators in Europe, North America and the Middle East to replace their mandated paper systems.

Investment boost

The biggest news for the company in the past year has been the announcement of an eight-figure investment from US private equity firm, Merit Holdings, based out of Chicago. This has brought the company under the umbrella of Business Infusions, the largest veterinary software company in the world.

"Much of the regulatory information that needs to be submitted to regulators is already entered by vets into their own systems, then double-entered either by the vets themselves or by members of training staff into a separate system or even a paper ledger," notes Dargan.

"By connecting with Business Infusions products such as HVMS [Hospital & Veterinary Management System] and Cassadol Equine we plan to make the recording of regulatory veterinary data even easier and simpler for our customers. We all want to make sure equine welfare regulations are followed, but we want to make it as simple and painless as possible."

"We all want to make sure equine welfare regulations are followed, but we want to make it as simple and painless as possible."



Leo Clancy, CEO Enterprise Ireland, Finlay Dargan and Pierce Dargan of Equine MediRecord, An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar and Prince Bandar bin Khalid Al-Faisal, chairman of the Jockey Club of Saudi Arabia

COMPETITIVE EDGE

As we navigate the ever-changing business world, National Standards Authority of Ireland is active in helping Irish companies to use standards to their innovation advantage, writes chief executive officer Geraldine Larkin

As the late US economist Theodore Levitt put it, innovation is the vital spark of all human change, improvement and progress. An organisation's ability to innovate is widely recognised as a key factor for sustained viability and growth. Working with standards can shorten market time and save an organisation time and money.

'Supporting National Economic Growth and SMEs' is one of the key pillars of National Standards Authority of Ireland's (NSAI) strategic plan. Throughout the past year, we worked on the development of several tools to aid SMEs with the certification process such as self-assessment questionnaires for organisations to determine how ready they are for certification.

Through engagement with NSAI, Irish companies can ensure that they are ahead of the curve when it comes to product and service innovation as we continue to strive for a better, safer and more sustainable future.

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

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

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

Independent certification

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

NSAI provides independent certification to organisations, enabling them to demonstrate compliance with international standards.

For example, ISO 9001:2015 is a globally-

“Companies can use standards to make a leap forward in their business and help them avail of opportunities as they arise.”



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

recognised quality management system standard, which provides a model that companies can use to build an effective quality management system.

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

ISO 27001:2022 is an internationally-recognised standard for managing risks related to the security of the information you hold. The standard is designed to provide a framework for an organisation's information security management system, which includes policies and procedures relevant to how data is controlled and used.

In 2022 there were changes to this standard with a modified title, simplified wording and structure and a reduction in the number of controls and control categories.

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

Importance of innovation

Embracing innovation is crucial for Irish companies as evolution enables

the ability to compete at a global level.

Research and innovation need standards to create a foundational framework from which innovators can design specific solutions. The framework provides a set of parameters to work within so that they can focus their energy on creating tailored and impactful solutions.

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

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

The ISO 56000 Series Innovation Management System provides businesses with the fundamentals of innovation management principles, describing why organisations should engage in innovation activities. It gives businesses a guidance framework that can be adapted to suit any business and sector.

The innovation standard series is the

result of years of work from national standards bodies around the world, including NSAI. It focuses on the system companies put in place as a driver of innovation in their business.

Creating value

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

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

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

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

In the past year NSAI expanded its certification work with our NSAI UK office becoming fully operational as we welcomed our first clients. Crucially, our colleagues in the UK can now certify any commodity, process or practice as conforming with the requirements of the UKCA mark.

NSAI is proud to sponsor the Innovator of the Year category in the SFA National Business Awards. These awards go to the heart of what NSAI does in supporting Irish businesses and organisations, celebrating excellence, achievement and innovation while aligning with our strategic goals for the future.

For more information on how working with NSAI benefits your organisation, go to www.n sai.ie for Ireland and www.n sai.uk for the UK, contact NSAI via its social media channels or subscribe to its newsletter online.

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Dr Eoghan Finneran,
chief executive
officer, Farmeye

An eye on the ground

Farmeye is on a mission to improve the lives of farmers and the environment through technology with customers including some of the largest agri-food corporates in the EU

The idea for Farmeye was sparked when co-founder Brendan Allen was sitting at the kitchen table on the family farm in Co Roscommon with his brother Derek who said he was struggling with the mountains of paperwork involved in nitrates compliance.

“Brendan thought there had to be a better way of managing nutrients on a farm properly by digitising the whole process of soil health to take the pain out of it for the farmer,” says Dr Eoghan Finneran, who in 2017, together with Allen and Joe Desbonnet, licensed software developed by NUI Galway researchers to spin Farmeye out into a private company.

“Our solution measures nutrients in the soil in a detailed way that is easy to interpret. It provides advice to farmers through an online map so that they are not wasting fertile soil, saving time and money and doing their best from an environmental perspective. This could mean, for example, not spreading extra nitrogen or phosphorous where it is not required,” Finneran explains.

The solution combines GPS technology for soil sampling, GIS for mapping and satellite imagery. With a team of 13, Farmeye now has 1.3 million hectares of

“We believe you have to get your boots dirty and have on-the-ground measurement to verify that data is truly authentic.”

land mapped in terms of soil health, which means it is running the largest geo-tagged soil database in Europe.

Clever combination

“We are part of a small group of companies in Europe involved in this area and are unique in Ireland. The innovative bit with Farmeye is that we use the combination of satellite imagery and on-the-ground measurement, while others are just doing the satellite part. We believe you have to get your boots dirty and have the on-the-ground measurement to verify that data is truly authentic,” says Finneran.

Farmeye’s customers are mainly corporate companies, government agencies and dairy co-operatives such as Lakeland Dairies. Notably, Farmeye was the IT and data partner on a recent national soil sampling pilot run by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

“In the past two years we have evolved from measuring basic nutrients to looking at carbon. We are well advanced towards ISO certification and becoming the only measuring, reporting and verification platform for farm carbon and natural capital in Ireland,” notes Finneran.

“We are in a position to measure any of a farm’s natural assets including water quality and trees. Our mission is to improve the lives of farmers and the environment through technology. Data verification is key to that as it allows the positive things farmers are doing to be measured, such as how they positively contribute to sequestration.

“This in turn means farmers can create a carbon credit or show their environmental credentials to a customer, food company or government agency.”

www.farmeye.ie

Continuity contact

Dublin-based ROCTEL’s mission is to provide best-in-class cloud, collaboration, security and broadband services with an approach emphasising innovation, sustainability and planning

From working on university spinouts with deep-tech intellectual property transfer to its own artificial-intelligence research projects, ROCTEL has been innovative since its inception in 2000, according to founder Cormac Reid.

“However, the development of our unique ROC SOLID service and our network management centre is our true innovation and differentiator. This facilitates and empowers us to offer innovative and subscription-based enterprise services with real and tangible outcomes,” he says.

“In particular, our subscription-based service ROC SOLID RETAIL aggregates carrier services, WiFi, advanced business intelligence and analytics to help retailers stay agile in a cashless society. It secures against ever-present cyber threats and harnesses retailers’ data to help them to make the most informed decisions.”

ROC SOLID was the beginning of ROCTEL’s managed-service offerings with its foundational network management centre. “We built things out from there, from our own initial data centre to migrating to enterprise

N+1 facilities that offer tier-one, carrier-grade mesh with three interdependent operators for all of our cloud-based services,” says Reid.

Rapid growth

“We are doubling the size of our data centre facilities this year and continuing to make big investments here to help us meet client demand. Our growth is getting faster and faster – we are currently 150% ahead on last year which was a record year. This means we are growing our team of 14 people and we are out to market to fill key positions.”

ROCTEL’s client base is largely made up of mid-market multinationals and larger indigenous companies, mainly across the financial, retail and aviation sectors. Other key sectors include enterprise, tech and renewables.

In the past year, the company continued to develop its cybersecurity service CYBERDEFENCE. “Unique to ROCTEL, this service offers an aggregation of the best-in-class technologies and, more critically, people that are working hard with many high-profile clients to implement complex technologies as a service to ensure they can grow and thrive in this uncertain world,” notes Reid.

“Our future plans are to focus on offering our customers the best services at the best possible pricing to help them reduce risk and operational costs.

“While we have had offices in London for over a decade we are actively growing our presence in Spain and soon France, all to help our international client base to have a single contact for the continuity of their security, connectivity and collaboration needs.”

“The development of our unique ROC SOLID service and our network management centre is our true innovation and differentiator.”



Cormac Reid, founder, ROCTEL

www.roctel.net

FILLING FINANCE GAPS

June Butler, chief executive officer of the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, outlines why the organisation is so important in supporting Irish SMEs and highlights latest developments

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

A The SBCI was set up in 2014 to avail of both national and international funding for the purpose of making low-cost credit available to Irish SMEs. Credit is provided through on-lending partners which in turn lend directly to SMEs. Today, the SBCI aims to help SMEs grow, innovate and prosper by driving increased access to low-cost funding, leading to a better economy for all.

Q What support can the SBCI provide to Irish SMEs?

A The SBCI is here to help SMEs fund their ambitious business plans by creating a more competitive and dynamic environment for SME funding. It provides wholesale finance and guarantees to Irish lenders so that they can then provide finance on favourable terms to Irish SMEs.

The SBCI provides guarantee schemes through a network of on-lending partners that includes banks, non-banks and credit unions, ensuring that the benefit of SBCI support is delivered to SME borrowers. Products are designed to fill gaps in the finance market. Loans supported by the SBCI will generally be at a lower interest rate, have reduced security requirements or be of a longer term than is available in the market.

In 2022, the SBCI delivered more than €630m of funding to over 7,000 SMEs across all sectors, with a mix of risk-sharing guarantee schemes and low-cost lending facilities. Since its establishment, the SBCI has provided over €3.2bn of funding support to over 50,000 SMEs.

Q In your view, what are the key challenges faced by SMEs?

A Irish SMEs are facing multiple challenges given the current business environment, including the ongoing economic effects of Brexit, recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic, the availability of skilled staff and access to new customers and markets. However, the abrupt increase of input costs, especially energy costs, presents the most significant challenge to SMEs in Ireland right now.

The SBCI aims to help SMEs enhance their energy efficiency and improve their sustainability in the long-term. Irish SMEs know that to stay competitive and improve their future growth prospects they will need to consider their green transition and invest more in areas such as sustainability and digitalisation.

We understand that making a significant investment decision can be difficult when costs are increasing, but the SBCI is committed to helping Irish SMEs overcome these challenges by providing accessible and affordable finance, through such schemes as



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

the Energy Efficiency Loan Scheme, launched in 2022.

Q What is the Energy Efficiency Loan Scheme?

A It is a guarantee scheme specifically tailored to the needs of SMEs, farmers and fishers investing in energy-efficient equipment and looking to reduce their energy bills. The scheme offers low-cost finance ranging from €10,000 to €150,000 at reduced interest rates and repayment terms of up to 10 years.

This repayment flexibility aims to ensure that the business's existing cash flow is not negatively impacted by the investment cost. Credit is available across a range of finance products to ensure the best match for the business funding requirements. Types of finance include term loans, hire purchase and asset finance products.

Businesses from different economic sectors, from agriculture to hospitality, can avail of this funding to invest in energy-saving measures, such as heat pumps, solar panels, LED lighting or commercial appliances. It will provide

them with cost-effective return on investment, while also increasing their energy efficiency and helping them transition to more sustainable business models.

The Energy Efficiency Loan Scheme will run until the end of December 2023 and is available through AIB, Bank of Ireland, Capitalflow, Fexco Asset Finance and Finance Ireland.

Q How is the Ukraine Credit Guarantee Scheme going?

A The Government recently launched the €1.2bn Ukraine Credit Guarantee Scheme to support businesses and primary producers facing additional costs and supply chain disruptions due to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

Operated by the SBCI on behalf of the Government, the scheme facilitates the provision of working capital and medium-term investment finance to SMEs impacted by increased input costs, including energy costs.

Finance is available from €10,000 to €1m at reduced interest rates and with repayment terms up to six years. Loans

“The SBCI is here to help SMEs fund their ambitious business plans by creating a more competitive and dynamic environment for SME funding.”

up to €250,000 are unsecured, meaning that no personal guarantee or collateral is required for loans of up to that amount.

To benefit from this support, businesses must self-declare that their costs have increased by a minimum of 10% on their 2020 cost figures due to the impact of the conflict in Ukraine and that finance is being sought specifically because of difficulties being experienced due to the conflict. The refinancing of existing loans is not permitted.

The scheme will run until the end of 2024 and is currently available through Bank of Ireland with other on-lenders to be announced soon.

Q What is next for SBCI in terms of sustainability?

A Over the past few months, the SBCI has been collaborating with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications and the European Investment Bank on the development of new loan guarantee schemes.

An open call for on-lenders to deliver the new Growth and Sustainability Loan Scheme was issued in early February. This scheme will support long-term investments by SMEs and primary producers and contribute to the green and sustainable transformation of the Irish economy. It is due to launch later this year.

In addition, the SBCI is designing its first consumer loan scheme, the Retrofit Loan Guarantee Scheme, aimed at supporting consumers and small landlords who wish to upgrade the energy efficiency of their residential property. It will provide low-interest-rate, unsecured personal loans to help homeowners fund the cost of retrofitting their homes.

To find about more, go to the SBCI website (www.sbc.gov.ie), its social media channels (Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram), helpline (1800 804 482) or email (info@sbci.gov.ie). The team regularly attends events across the country and welcome those opportunities to speak to SME owners in person.



David Walsh-Kemmis, founder and managing director, Ballykilcavan Brewing Company

Natural progression

Ballykilcavan Brewing Company is taking a truly holistic approach to sustainability from natural brewing methods and local sourcing to recycling and promoting biodiversity

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

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

The Ballykilcavan Brewery now produces eight core-range beers including pale, brown and red ales, stout and lager. All the barley, hops and water required in the brewing process are sourced from within 500m of the brewery building itself.

"We have a longer than usual maturation period and all our beers are

"For us, it's about energy- and water-use reduction, sourcing local ingredients, removing plastic and supporting biodiversity measures and the local community."

completely unfiltered and unpasteurised when they are packaged," says Walsh-Kemmis. "This natural method adds flavour and complexity and allows the flavour of the ingredients to really shine through."

The roof of the brewery has been fitted with solar panels to reduce energy consumption, all spent grain is recycled and all product packaging is plastic-free and fully recyclable.

Going for Gold

The company's sustainability credentials are backed up by its Gold-status membership of Origin Green, Bord Bia's sustainability programme. Ballykilcavan is one of 59 food and drink companies in the country to obtain this highest level of certification.

"What I like about Origin Green is that it gives us a great framework to monitor our sustainability progress. For us, it's about energy- and water-use reduction, sourcing local ingredients [most of which come from the farm], removing plastic from the brewery and supporting biodiversity measures and the local community," says Walsh-Kemmis.

"It covers everything from generating enough power from our solar panels to expand the brewery by another 30% to seeing the first confirmed barn owl chicks born at the farm for at least 20 years."

The future looks bright with the addition of six new fermenters, which will see capacity doubled to 120,000 litres. This will facilitate faster production scale-up as the company looks to grow its customer base locally and move further into export markets, according to Walsh-Kemmis. It is already exporting to northern Italy and south-west France and will be sending beer to Paris, Prague and Switzerland for the first time this year.

www.ballykilcavan.com

Grand designs

The Factory, an eco-friendly printer and graphic design studio in Co Offaly, has steeped itself in all things sustainable for over two decades

Formed in 2000 by husband-and-wife team Brendan and Gina Dooley, The Factory came about at a time when there was not a lot of talk – at least in Ireland – about sustainability. The couple started a journal called The Local Planet, where they regularly featured guest editors and contributors with extensive expertise and learned a huge amount about sustainable practices.

When their daughter Lisa came on board in 2018, they decided to go all in on the sustainability side of things. "We wanted to become Ireland's most sustainable business," says Brendan Dooley. The paper used by The Factory for printing is either recycled or from sustainably-managed forests. The company generates its own solar and wind energy to power the machines, produces very little waste and uses plant-based inks and toners.

Apart from keeping their own business as sustainable as possible, the Dooleys put a lot of thought into how to encourage other businesses to do the same. "Every business has to go that direction eventually. We want to show that as well as being good for the environment, it's good for business," says Dooley.

With 11 direct employees and one

"Community groups and small businesses will be able to see firsthand what we have done and learn from our mistakes."

person on work experience, The Factory has customers all around the country, for example, the Dingle Hub in Co Kerry and Greenacres in Co Wicklow. At its base in Birr is all the paraphernalia one would expect from a business with such sustainable credentials – solar panels, batteries and even beehives.

Taking initiative

The Dooleys are keen to show what they have done to other companies in the hope that they might follow their lead. So, in collaboration with the Local Enterprise Office and other partners, they introduced a scheme of workshops called Ecoskills.

"Community groups and small businesses will be able to see firsthand what we have done. They can ask us about things like costs and suppliers and learn from our mistakes," says Dooley.

In 2023 there will be another innovative departure for the company in the form of a more sustainable approach to signs.

"Signs are often just used once. Our sign-maker came up with the idea of using wooden pallets – which we get with deliveries – to make A-frames," explains Dooley. The sign is slid into the frame, the customer rents it, and when it comes back The Factory removes the graphics so the frame can be re-used by another customer.

Looking back, Dooley says one of the best moves the management team made was pursuing further education. All three undertook a 'Climate Resilience for Business' course at the then Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, for example. "Small businesses can reach a plateau, but ongoing learning allows them to keep expanding," he says.



Brendan Dooley, manager and Lisa Dooley, creative director, The Factory

www.thefactory.ie

Squeaky clean

Not only does The Handmade Soap Company produce heavenly natural scents, it also presents them in the most sustainable packaging it can find

Husband-and-wife team Donagh Quigley and Gemma McGowan started The Handmade Soap Company very much from scratch back in 2010. With just two pots on their kitchen stove, they began selling at farmers' markets in the run-up to Christmas, but having shivered their way through the festive season wanted to find a better way. So they went to the major creative trade fair Showcase in Dublin – where they got something of a baptism of fire.

“We hadn't a clue how it was going to go,” says Quigley. “We had eight types of soap and could make 60 bars a day. On the first day of the show we got an order for 3,000 bars.”

The order was from a chain of shops that also wanted the soaps to have barcodes – new territory for Quigley and McGowan. They met the order though, and things went from there. It wasn't all plain sailing; the first five years were tough, with, says Quigley, a lot of “driving around the country and cold-calling gift shops”. But perseverance – backed by a strong, ecologically-sound product – won the day.



Donagh Quigley, founder, The Handmade Soap Company

Solid customer base

“Customers kept coming back for more,” says Quigley. The business employs about 35-40 people most of the year, but before Christmas it takes on extra people to meet demand. It has a solid customer base in Ireland and customers across Europe (Germany, Switzerland, Sweden and Portugal are the biggest markets).

There are also promising signs from the US market.

“It was a natural extension of the way we live that the company would be instilled with sustainability values.”

In February, Quigley went to his second US trade show of the year so far and sales to that part of the world are growing by about 100% year on year.

Sustainability is a big part of this brand's appeal. Its founders were themselves always very particular about the provenance of everything they ate or bought. “It was a natural extension of the way we live that the company would be instilled with those values,” says Quigley.

All of The Handmade Soap Company's plastic packaging is made from recycled plastics such as old Coca Cola or water bottles. On its recently launched men's range it made the bottles look great in their own right – in order to eliminate the need for secondary packaging. In 2022 its Anam range was the first in the world to feature compostable refills for liquid soap. The business has also introduced a deodorant in a fully compostable tube.

Ultimately, says Quigley, the couple has always felt their role was to drive The Handmade Soap Company's packaging as far down the green route as technology would allow – and hope that customers would come along for the ride.

www.thehandmadesoapcompany.ie

Are you the Best Small Business in Ireland?

The 2024 the National Small Business Awards will launch again in September. If you would like to see yourself featured in this supplement next year visit www.sfaawards.ie to explore all categories and see our previous winners.

HEALTHY PERFORMANCE

With its continuing focus on research, education and wellness, DeCare is playing a key role in the general shift towards greater awareness of the importance of employee health and wellbeing

With a 23-year history in Claremorris, Co Mayo, specialist dental, vision and wellness benefits provider DeCare delivered its strongest performance in Ireland to date in 2022, growing its customer base by 21% to over 65,000 members.

The societal impact of this growth is multi-faceted, resulting in enhanced quality of life and reduced cost of dental and optical care for its members and partners globally, according to Maureen Walsh, managing director, DeCare Dental Insurance Ireland.

“We are privileged to serve very loyal members, which is heartening because it indicates that our plans and services are providing tangible value. Each day, we are helping more people to attend the dentist and the optician and improving the overall health of the population,” she says.

“Our services and partnerships have grown in reach and our team has grown in depth throughout the year, which enables the team to reach more members in meaningful ways.”

DeCare’s workforce in Ireland increased from 135 to 156 people over the past year with new team members from the US, Pakistan, Singapore and Afghanistan joining the business.

“Each day, we are helping more people to attend the dentist and the optician and improving the overall health of the population.”

Key trends

According to a benefits survey by McKinsey conducted in 2021, over 25% of employers in Ireland have changed their benefits strategy and package. Benefits that were once considered a ‘nice to have’ are now an integral component of employee benefit programmes.

“Key themes emerging from our conversations with corporate decision makers and their teams are sustainability, customer-centric delivery, digital communication, diversity and inclusion and recognition that quality of life has a direct impact on business performance,” notes Walsh.

At a macro and industry level, inflationary pressures, rising interest rates and changing business models are key challenges that DeCare and other businesses will continue to face.

“Inflation, supply, and demand are key dynamics across society and dental care is no different. Access to care in dental



The DeCare team at Ibec's KeepWell Awards

practices is characterised by long waiting periods for appointments as waiting lists grow,” says Walsh.

“Dental insurance has never been more important. Over the past two years, we have seen dental inflation approaching 15%. While the extent to which dental inflation will continue to trend upwards is not certain at this point, it is a reality which has a significant impact on the cost of care.”

The big picture

Against this backdrop, DeCare has an important role to play in providing financial assistance through insurance, education, and advocacy for its members, says Walsh. “We are focused on the big picture and how our services enhance overall quality of life.”

When it comes to delivering wellness programmes, 2022 was a milestone year for the DeCare team in many ways, she adds.

“Companies are seeking ways to keep their staff well, retain staff in employment and foster connection. Dental and vision benefits, bolstered by education and wellness, provide meaningful avenues for this connection.

“We seek to create ‘Happier, Healthier Lives’, through workplace wellness programmes and sustain a healthy community culture that educates, motivates and empowers employees and organisations to adopt and maintain healthy lifestyle behaviours.”

DeCare offers a full range of wellbeing programmes and continues to evolve programmes in oral health, general health and wellness including mental

health to meet the new and emerging health needs of its clients.

Research and innovation

Throughout the past year, DeCare employees have been studying at or graduated from leading universities such as NUI Galway, Atlantic Technological University (ATU) Letterkenny, ATU Castlebar, ATU Sligo, ATU Galway, University College Dublin and Trinity College Dublin.

“The specific skills gained through higher education combined with industry expertise have resulted in research-driven product innovation for our members. Globally, our teams have created tremendous opportunities together because of an ability to change, innovate and learn,” notes Walsh.

DeCare partners with a number of agencies that support its work, including research institutes, academic bodies and a variety of health professional organisations.

At present, DeCare’s health promotion manager Dave Casey is leading doctoral research at Trinity College Dublin that seeks to understand how important social connections with others truly affect our health.

This area of study focuses on the management, prevention, and promotion of health. Minority populations are examined in relation to fundamental concepts such as belonging, isolation, loneliness in connections, narrative approaches and diversity and inclusion.

“This innovative investigation aims to unravel us as human beings. At DeCare, there is a fundamental recognition that

DeCare DRIVERS OF GROWTH

- Companies recognise that they have a responsibility to enable their teams to live a healthy lifestyle and have identified dental and vision benefits as a key enabler.
- Companies are seeking meaningful ways to retain and attract staff in a buoyant labour market.
- The cost of and access to dental care and inflation in corporate and individual markets has resulted in recent sales growth and retention of business.
- It has been a record year for job creation and full employment in Ireland.
- There is a greater focus on oral health and vision health brought about by wider recognition of the links to general health and wellbeing.

our dental, vision and wellness plans and services are designed to improve the quality of life for our members,” says Walsh.

“We are committed to playing our role in the national response to promote oral health. There are significant challenges and tremendous opportunities to enable our members to enjoy the highest attainable state of oral health and live healthy and productive lives.”



Matt McCann,
co-founder and
CEO, Access Earth

Open season

Access Earth shows as much commitment to its employees as it does to its mission of making every business in the world accessible

Few people are better placed than Access Earth co-founder and CEO Matt McCann to cast a critical eye over accessibility policies. Having cerebral palsy has made him all too familiar with the obstacles – both physical and otherwise – a person with a disability can face.

McCann decided to do something about it, and co-founded Access Earth with Donal McClean (its chief operating officer) back in 2015. Fresh out of college, McCann was very much inspired by his own experiences growing up with a disability.

“I use a walking frame and as I was going through school and college there were always challenges,” he says.

He and McClean set out with no small aim in mind: to make every business in the world accessible. They are making inroads into this by offering a holistic service including everything from accessibility awareness training to office accessibility assessment.

According to McCann, among the highlights over the past eight years was working with Microsoft as it opened its Oxford Circus store in London – now known as the ‘Microsoft Experience Centre’ – to deliver disability awareness

“Through my own experience I know you need a lot of flexibility at work when managing a disability.”

training for the entire staff.

Meanwhile, McCann has spoken at the United Nations multiple times and last year Access Earth was brought on as accessibility partner on a World Economic Forum project. “For a relatively small business, it’s great to get onto the world stage like that,” he says.

Progressive policies

With five full-time and two part-time employees, Access Earth puts workplace wellbeing high on the agenda. Its 50% disability employment policy is only the tip of the iceberg. It also has unlimited sick leave through its ‘health leave as needed’ approach.

“Through my own experience I know you need a lot of flexibility when managing a disability,” says McCann.

It was also one of the first companies in the country to introduce a four-day week (in 2020).

“We have a very passionate set of people working with us. We want to make sure everyone looks after themselves so they can work at their best,” notes McCann.

This year the business is running a wellbeing ‘experiment’ every month to see if there are other policies worth introducing. For example, in January it trialled not scheduling meetings before lunchtime on a Monday and in February weekly catch-up meetings were arranged to give people a chance to put forward ideas.

With all of this going on, it is unlikely Access Earth will have any difficulty in achieving the aim of taking on three new staff by the end of this year. “We want to expand the team to share the load,” says McCann.

Hear, hear

Looking after staff has long been a priority at southeast radio station Beat 102-103 and it is paying dividends in all kinds of ways

“This is a big year for us,” says Beat 102-103’s CEO and programme director Gabrielle Cummins. She is not exaggerating; on 1 July the radio station based in Waterford will celebrate 20 years on air – no mean feat for something that started out as a pilot project.

On board from day one, Cummins explains when it won its licence back in 2002 and started broadcasting the following year, Beat 102-103 was Ireland’s first regional youth music station. It blazed the trail, and there is now a fleet of regional youth stations around the country.

Although anyone can tune in to Beat 102-103, it is aimed at those in the southeast region and, more generally, those aged between 15 and 34. Apart from winning a strong audience among its target group, the station has gained quite the reputation for workplace wellbeing.

During Covid-19 it took a fresh look at this issue and, among other initiatives, introduced a confidential counselling service whereby staff can get up to four free sessions per year. It is also keen to promote equality and diversity and was one of the first in its sector to link in with

the Irish Centre for Diversity, which now provides training across numerous radio stations.

“A lot of radio station output in Ireland doesn’t reflect the diversity of the society we live in but all of these steps will help,” says Cummins.

Constantly adapting

The station has also made quarterly wellbeing lunchtime sessions a firm fixture. Each one features a speaker who addresses an issue of relevance to staff, with recent topics ranging from financial wellbeing to the menopause.

Beat 102-103 is 75% owned by the *Irish Times*, with the rest owned by well-known Waterford businessman Des Whelan. It shares its base with sister station Waterford Local Radio (WLR). The impressive nine-studio building in the suburb of Ardkeen was in fact Ireland’s first purpose-built broadcasting centre outside of RTÉ.

Much of the station’s success over the years has been thanks to its commitment to constant change to keep up with the rapidly-evolving habits of its target market. “Look at the 15 to 34 year olds and how much they’ve changed,” says Cummins. “When we started there was no social media. We have had to embrace so many different avenues to stay relevant.”

It has certainly done that; the leading Irish radio station on TikTok, it also has a strong Instagram presence. Social media channels are essentially “shop windows” where Beat 102-103 can highlight its core radio product, says Cummins. “We want to remind people that we are here and to come listen to us – and they do.”

“When we started there was no social media. We have had to embrace so many different avenues to stay relevant.”



Back row: Laura Holmes, Gabrielle Cummins, Robbie Byrne, Claire Rowe, Shaun Connolly, Cúan Cusack. Front row: Sinead Cunningham and Michael Barry, Beat 102-103

A SAFE PATHWAY

Digital transformation must be accompanied by behavioural changes and the use of tools, procedures and appropriate protection measures capable of extending security to digital operations and remote workers, writes David Curtin, CEO of .IE

There has been a mass mobilisation of digital across our economy and society in recent years. Businesses have been forced to adapt the way they operate, communicate and sell in order to meet customers' needs with many fast-tracking their digital transformation.

Hybrid working models with remote online access for staff are also commonplace. The 'risk footprint' has expanded as a result, so cybersecurity has become a major focus. There is a need for vigilance and action by both business owners and by their employees.

Our recent .IE Domain Profile Report 2022 revealed the reputational strength of .ie as the domain of choice for Ireland. As guardians of Ireland's critical Internet infrastructure, the .ie namespace, we take steps to keep the .ie domain safe. This ensures that the level of threat to .ie websites is lower than other top level domains such as .com.

As part of the domain registration process, every applicant must provide tangible evidence of identity and connection to Ireland. Applications from new customers are manually reviewed by our team to ensure they meet this requirement. This process keeps the .ie domain largely free from registrations by bad actors with their quick-moving scams and other illegal activities.

Layers of security

We have established consumer protection protocols with the Garda National Cyber Crime Bureau and national regulatory bodies to address online illegality and permit 'take-down' of .ie websites under



David Curtin, CEO of .IE

certain circumstances. We also achieved industry standard ISO 27001 security certification, which validates that an organisation manages and mitigates its cybersecurity risks effectively.

In addition, we provide an extra layer of security to owners of .ie domain names, free of charge. This service provides a

periodic scanning of .ie websites and involves instant notification to an SME's hosting provider, which can help them take the corrective action when a scam has been detected. This invaluable service helps innocent victims who might be unaware that they have experienced a cyber attack on their website.

“As part of the domain registration process, every applicant must provide tangible evidence of identity and connection to Ireland.”

“At .IE it is a priority to proactively tackle abuse in the .ie namespace to protect both SMEs and their customers. The findings of our .IE Domain Profile Report highlight some security vulnerabilities of .ie profiles, but also demonstrates where we provide enhanced supports to help Ireland's digital economy thrive,” said Mick Begley, .IE's chief information officer.

The .IE Tipping Point Report 2022 revealed that over 50% of SMEs are planning a significant digital investment in the next five years. SMEs are facing a new wave of economic challenges post Covid-19. We want to help ensure they are investing in that digitalisation securely and are aware of the necessary security features to implement.

For further information go to www.weare.ie. The National Cyber Security Centre and the Garda National Cyber Crime Bureau also provide invaluable advice to SMEs.

CYBER THREATS HOW TO STAY SAFE

1 Keep your software patching up to date

Software updates often contain the latest (and strongest) security patches. Old operating systems and software versions can be more easily exploited and accessed. Enable automatic updates through your device's options or settings menu. If staff time and productivity are a concern, tell your device to perform critical updates during off-hours.

2 Install (and turn on) antivirus tools

It is so important to have your antivirus enabled. Modern antivirus software is designed to root out and proactively remove malware threats from your computer.

3 Use two-factor authentication

Two-factor authentication is one of the most simple and effective ways to protect yourself online. It adds an additional barrier against cyber criminals that might have been successful in stealing your primary password or credentials.

4 Use strong, unique passwords

A strong password should be at least

ten characters in length and include a combination of upper and lower-case letters, numbers and symbols. Change all passwords every 90 days – at least!

5 Stay alert to social engineering scams

Social engineering is a form of psychological manipulation – often involving persuasion – with the aim of tricking you into giving away sensitive information. One of the most common forms is phishing. In a typical phishing scenario you may get an email that appears to be legitimate and contains a file to view or a link to click. Never assume an email is what it says it is until you know otherwise. Be wary of senders that you don't recognise or with suspicious-looking email addresses and domain names.

6 Regularly back up and encrypt your data

Recovering from a ransomware attack will be easier when your essential business information is regularly backed up to the cloud or to an external drive in a different location. Encrypt your backups to provide

further protection beyond a simple password. Many data-backup solutions already offer built-in encryption tools, or the option to store encrypted backups.

7 Buy a security certificate

If you manage a website which processes customer information, protect data in transit with a security certificate. Customers need to feel safe and secure when purchasing online and will look for websites whose address begins with an https (not http) and displays a lock symbol. This indicates that a security certificate is installed.

8 Security is everyone's responsibility

One of the best defences against cybercrime is employees' security awareness and education. Enrol yourself and your employees in an accredited cybersecurity training course from a reputable organisation. Ongoing training and raising awareness can help make cybersecurity part of your business's culture and can make your employees more confident and vigilant when going about their day-to-day work.

VIBRANT VISIONARIES

All of the winners in the Emerging New Business category in the SFA National Small Business Awards 2023 have come up with clever ideas and approaches that others haven't thought of before

CLIMEACTION

Based in Cobh, Co Cork, Climeaction helps businesses to de-carbonise by taking a whole operations approach. Its 'climate action as a service' model typically leads to 40% cost savings on average and a logical pathway to meet climate targets for each of its clients.

Within its first 18 months, Climeaction has worked with over 300 companies, about half of which are large enterprises with 250 employees or more. Of those, 60% are mega-scale multinationals and co-founder Paul Murphy expects growth this year to be mainly driven by the large industry sector.

"While working for an energy services company around the world, I saw that the key problem with global multinationals in developing climate action strategies was silos within the organisation all pulling in different directions. We are cutting out all of that. Taking an umbrella view, we focus on the two key performance indicators of reducing carbon and reducing costs at the same time.

"Taking an umbrella view, we focus on the two key performance indicators of reducing carbon and reducing costs at the same time."

"We're saying that the climate problem involves every single aspect of the business from start to finish, from raw materials to the end consumer, and we're looking at it all together. Where we differ from competitors is that we put boots on the ground and go onsite to help clients to save time with our expertise in implementing and tracking projects," says co-founder Paul Murphy.

"Aiming to act as a master vendor, we operate on the basis of collaboration over competition to deliver the best results for clients. This means we bring in outside specialists where necessary. We're selling advice, not technology."

Last year, Climeaction grew by 100% which was ahead of expectations. "We plan to double our business this year and increase our team from 10 to 20 people. If we had limitless resources, I believe we could double that again the demand for our services is so high," notes Murphy.

www.climeaction.com

ECCOSPRAY

Ten years of research by now-retired German professor Dr Helmut Haas – along with the work of co-founders Dr



Joe Aherne and Paul Murphy, founders, Climeaction

Holger Friedrich, Robert Spittler and Will Hogan – led to the establishment of Irish-German start-up EccoSpray in 2022. Its aim is to reduce the environmental impact of clinical practices with its patented ultrasound contact spray, which has already had a soft launch in Ireland and Germany.

"A renowned urologist, Dr Haas had a lifetime's experience with ultrasound gels and the pain points involved with them. Initially his work was about making them less messy. Through trial and error over time, he managed to create a spray that uses up to seven times less volume of liquid. Using pump action, one or two puffs onto the skin is enough for the average ultrasound," explains Hogan, who has been working on the commercialisation of the idea in Ireland.

"Up to 90% less cleaning materials such as tissues and wipes are required post-examination, which has a big impact on reducing clinical waste. We reached out to the Health Innovation Hub in Ireland to highlight this simple idea of replacing gels which have been used for 40 years. Samples have gone out to hospitals and clinics via distributors and the spray is being tested with different probes."

"Up to 90% less cleaning materials such as tissues and wipes are required post-examination, which has a big impact on reducing clinical waste."

The timing of EccoSpray's launch couldn't be better as the new point-of-care ultrasound (PoCUS) continues to proliferate in the medical field. "PoCUS allows ultrasounds to be performed at a patient's bedside anywhere using a device the size of a smart phone. It has the power to democratise healthcare and with increased sophistication and artificial intelligence will lead to faster diagnoses," says Hogan. "The 50ml EccoSpray is the ideal accompaniment to PoCUS. Doctors can put it in their pocket along with the PoCUS device."

www.eccospray.ie



William Hogan, co-founder, EccoSpray

JUSTTIP

Set up in 2021 by James Fahy and Ciara Walsh, JUSTTIP is a simple and timely idea that addresses two key things: not knowing if a staff member in a restaurant or café gets a tip if you use a credit card and people not carrying cash any more, particularly coins. Walsh worked in hospitality as a teenager and had experienced the issues around tipping firsthand.

"We decided to set up a platform to allow people to tip staff directly through e-payment so all tips have a clear path from the customer to the employee," explains Fahy. "There is complete transparency for the employee as each has their own dashboard. We started out wanting to replace tips jars in coffee shops but the platform is being used by a range of places now, including restaurants, hotels and toilet facilities for tipping staff."

There are currently 250 outlets paying 5,000 staff a month using JUSTTIP with 1 million transactions to date. The business model involves a flat monthly fee plus a 5% transaction fee on tips.

Key to the growth of the business has been the introduction of new legislation last December which means employers are obligated to show a clear path to

"JUSTTIP allows employers to help their staff to earn more while keeping their business compliant with the new legislation."

EMERGING NEW BUSINESS



Ciara Walsh and James Fahy, co-founders, JustTip

where tips go. “If a tip is left using a debit card, this is a headache for businesses as they need to get an accountant in. We save them that hassle and administration by keeping tips completely separate,” says Walsh, who recently turned 21; Fahy is 22 years old.

“JUSTTIP allows employers to help their staff to earn more while keeping their business compliant with the new legislation. Similar legislation was recently passed in the House of Commons in the UK, where we plan to make a big push this year,” says Walsh.

www.justtip.net

READIWATCH

In business, a good philosophy to follow is “if you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it”. This is the founding philosophy of ReaDI-Watch, according to chief executive officer David Byrne.

“After my father Gerry Byrne [our chief scientific officer]retired as Dean of Engineering & Architecture in University College Dublin in 2014, he pitched this concept to me, and how it applies to companies that are doing innovation and research and development,” he says.

“This led us to grow a successful consulting business, where we enabled companies in Ireland, the UK and the EU to build strong management practices, teams and frameworks to invest in innovation and R&D. We worked with some great companies, such as Combilift, Anam Technologies and Dawn Farm Foods. We were lucky to take on Aisling

“This year, we are launching in Canada and are raising funding to scale in North America and drive our technology forward.”

Kirwan [former R&D Meats leader in Kerry Foods] in the business in 2018, and the idea for ReaDI-Watch took off.”

ReaDI-Watch builds advanced and value-adding digital solutions to help companies embrace innovation and R&D to truly unlock their potential. “We are doing this in a data-driven way, converting best-practice principles into easy-to-follow practices so that companies can scale their innovations with all available government supports along the way,” Byrne explains.

With the support of the Local Enterprise Office and Enterprise Ireland, and accelerated by the New Frontiers and Euronext IPOready programmes, the business has been bootstrapped to growth in three key markets - Ireland, the UK and Canada.

“Reinvesting tactfully for growth, we have grown a team of 15 people. We are driving fast towards becoming a



Dave Byrne, co-founder and CEO, ReaDI-Watch

global leader in the delivery of advanced digital solutions for innovation and R&D management, funding, investment and collaboration. This year, we are launching in Canada following initial successes and are raising funding to scale in North America and drive our technology forward.”

www.readi-watch.com

THE SMOOTH COMPANY

During the pandemic Aine Kennedy noticed a trend on TikTok where girls were dipping their toothbrush into gel and using it to slick back their hair. She decided to fill a gap she saw in the market and designed a premium hair-taming wand, which has become an Internet sensation with thousands of sales in 44 countries.

Kennedy had worked in the beauty

“Another reason The Smooth Company blew up on the Internet was that I went to the Coachella festival in California where all the influencers go.”

industry since she was 16, most recently with a tanning brand where she was involved in new product development. She has a degree in Entrepreneurship from Maynooth University.

“Broken baby hairs and flyaway hairs have always been an issue for me. I hate putting gel or hairspray in my hair and having to wash it then. I wanted something convenient. It took me two years to finally find the right formula, which is enriched with aloe vera and leaves no residue,” she explains.

A huge part of The Smooth Company’s success is that Kennedy decided to post behind-the-scenes content on TikTok, taking people on her journey of starting and growing a beauty brand; having her Granddad as a brand ambassador made these videos very popular. To date, The Smooth Company has recorded over 43 million views on TikTok.

“Another reason The Smooth Company blew up on the Internet was that I went to the Coachella festival in California where all the influencers go. The business was only two months old at the time and I just went up to random girls who I thought were influencers and posted photos and videos with them. One of these got 5 million views alone because we were tagged,” she adds.

Kennedy has successfully trademarked the Smooth Stick and plans to move manufacturing from China to Barcelona in 2023 to improve her supply chain.

www.thesmoothcompany.com



Aine and Eimear Kennedy, The Smooth Company

FLAGSHIP EVENT

Business Connect took place on 8 February in the Aviva Stadium, including a showcase exhibition of finalists in the SFA National Small Business Awards Programme 2023



MC Richard Curran, Steve Halpin, Lean Teams, Joyce Rigby Jones, Voltedge Management, Rohit Thakral, Target Integration

Attracting 300 delegates this year, Business Connect is a marketplace event focused on shining a light on Ireland's unique ecosystem where small and large firms often compete for contracts, talent, government and media attention – but they also thrive from each other.

On the day, leaders in procurement shared what they look for in partners; small companies provided insights on how to win big contracts and organisations and agencies outlined supports available for collaboration. There was plenty of opportunity for networking.

Minister of State Ossian Smyth also addressed the event to highlight the importance of SME participation in the public procurement process. He spoke about reforms underway in 2023, including updated guidance to assist SMEs and a new eTenders platform.



Elizabeth Bowen, SFA, Minister of State Ossian Smyth and Geraldine Magnier, SFA chair



Paul McNeive, motivational speaker



Richard Maynes, Aer Rianta International



Pat Downes, Lionheart Consultants and Marina Bleahen, Business Works

AWARDS PROGRAMME



MC Richard Curran, Gillian Shields, Coca-Cola HBC, Eamonn Donlyn, Darwin & Goliath, Ingrid de Doncker, Future Planet, Brendan Palmer, Electronic Recycling



Joanna Ciezka, co-founder, Irish Sock Society



Ronan Garvey and David O'Reilly, Zeus Scooters



Ciaran Scanlon, Catherine Doyle and Fintan Bradshaw, Permanent TSB



Gabrielle Cummins and Clare Rowe, Beat 102-103



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

BOOSTING SME PRODUCTIVITY

The positive impact of management development is a well-recognised strategy for improving the productivity of businesses, writes Aoife O’Sullivan, head of network development and innovation at Skillnet Ireland

Effective management practices have been found to support financial performance, staff retention and most importantly the sustainability of an organisation. This is particularly important for SMEs, which account for close to 70% of employment in the Irish economy.

Research by the National Competitiveness Council indicates that there is a need for increased SME productivity and performance to enable Ireland’s future competitiveness and growth.

Skillnet Ireland occupies a unique position in the talent development landscape and the role it plays in driving management capability for indigenous SMEs and multinationals based in Ireland.

As an agency of the Government, we operate an enterprise-led workforce development model where all programmes are designed to meet industry needs and are timely in their market delivery.

Each year, the agency supports over 20,000 businesses and 80,000 individuals – of which one-third are managers or business owners – with a wide range of talent development solutions tackling key commercial challenges.

Through our national reach of 70 Skillnet Business Networks, Skillnet Ireland provides strategic support to companies operating in the same industry sector (or

region), making investment in the development of their workforce more affordable and effective.

Our Skillnet Business Networks design and deliver a range of talent development solutions supporting management development from post-graduate higher education courses to professional executive programmes and short leadership masterclasses.

In 2022 alone, over 3,500 individuals participated in management and leadership programmes through our Skillnet Business Networks, gaining critical skills in team and staff management, leadership, business change and innovation.

Customised approach

The agility of the Skillnet Business Networks offering is reflected in its customised approach which is focused on the needs of a specific sector or region. Participants are afforded the flexibility to determine how, where and when programmes are delivered, in a way that suits the requirements of their business and employees.

In parallel with the activities of the Skillnet Business Networks, Skillnet Ireland also operates an initiative called MentorsWork, designed in partnership with the Small Firms Association. This dedicated management development programme provides mentoring and coaching support to SME owner-managers to drive



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

business growth by addressing the specific needs of each participating company.

With over 600 business leaders availing of the expert mentoring and guidance in 2022 alone, the programme is making an important contribution to creating a pool of managers and leaders transforming SMEs in Ireland.

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

LEARNING FROM THE BEST

As part of the SFA National Small Business Awards programme this year finalists were invited to a special masterclass weekend

A masterclass was provided to all finalists of the SFA National Small Business Awards 2023 on 13 and 14 January in the Hodson Bay Hotel, Athlone, Co Westmeath. Part of a prize package, the aim of the weekend was to immerse business owners in an entrepreneurial environment to stimulate new ideas for growth.

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

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

The content was supported by the SFA MentorsWork programme. All finalists receive a place on this 12-week, mentored, business-support programme, which is a joint initiative with Skillnet Ireland.

The format of the masterclass comprised firstly of media, negotiation and presentation skills training. Following this, Fiona Mulligan, HR executive at the SFA, provided HR guidance for small



businesses and an update on the latest developments in employment legislation.

Business owners also got the opportunity to explore how to manage the bottom line, how to be effective leaders through the next phase of growth and how to optimise LinkedIn for new opportunities.



GUEST SPEAKERS

Barry McLoughlin

A senior consultant in the Communications Clinic’s Training Clinic, Barry McLoughlin joined the company having worked for a number of years as a solicitor in private practice. In that time he worked with a wide range of clients in the areas of litigation and media law. He now provides training in job interviews, CV preparation and pitching, negotiating and influencing as well as media and general communication skills.

Padraic Clarke

A strong finance leader who has been a key player in the growth of three of Ireland’s leading companies in their respective fields, Padraic Clarke is experienced in driving organic growth and profitability as well as driving growth through successful participation in high-profile tender processes.

Valerie O’Keeffe

Management consultancy ClarityVP is headed up by Valerie O’Keeffe. An experienced strategic planning and change-management specialist, she has over 20 years’ experience devising and implementing interventions of this nature globally with significant success. A board-level executive, she was formally a member of the board of AIB Corporate, Commercial & Institutional Banking.

Maryrose Lyons

Founded by Maryrose Lyons, Brightspark guides individuals on their LinkedIn profiles across every sector and every level from new recruits to CEOs. She has recently delivered LinkedIn training to teams across a range of clients and sectors. Her training guides companies in working on their LinkedIn profile to improve lead generation and develop new business opportunities.

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GO RAIBH MAITH AGAIBH ...

We would like to thank all our sponsors and partners for their valuable support in making the **SFA National Small Business Awards** such a success over the last 19 years.

We look forward to continuing these relationships with another successful year in 2023.

 SFA National
Small Business
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 **SFA**
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- Presentations to Oireachtas Committees
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- Events, webinars and networking opportunities
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