



Denise O'Callaghan of Delicious Gluten Free Bakery



Pete Smyth, captain of the Entrepreneur Experience

Maura Hickey

Entrepreneurs ready for life-changing Experience

BY PETE SMYTH

Next weekend, a large number of Ireland's leading entrepreneurs will gather for the annual pilgrimage that is the Entrepreneur Experience. The location of the 2017 Experience is the retreat-like setting of Ballymaloe House in Co Cork.

While the location is deceivingly relaxed, the agenda is demanding. The format is simple: take 24 of Ireland's leading entrepreneurs, match them up with 24 of Ireland's talented emerging entrepreneurs and put them together for 24 hours of intense mentoring. The results can be life changing.

More than 170 of the country's best emerging entrepreneurs have been through the programme over the past six years. This year alone, some 100 additional entrepreneurs have competed for a place in the final 24. The class of 2017 has now been selected and the process of matching them up one by one with some of the established entrepreneurs is now complete.

Part of the real magic of the event is getting the matching process right. The chemistry of each pairing must be right and the organising team puts a great deal of time into achieving this goal. The matching is based on assessing a large combination of variables, including personalities, stage of development, sectors, opportunities, challenges, geographic focus and end markets.

The event, which is organised by CorkBIC, is unique and recognised internationally as one-of-a-kind, drawing entrepreneurs annually from sectors as varied as technology, food and beverage, engineering, leisure, medical, pharma, biotech, retail, healthcare and services.

Although the sectors are varied, it's remarkable how common the challenges are for the entrepreneurs looking to build world-class businesses.

Each year, a limited number of places are made available to international entrepreneurs to attend, adding another dimension to the programme. To date, entrepreneurs have come from across the globe, including Britain, Spain, France, Portugal, Italy, Chile, Rwanda and the US.

The format

The format of the event is not for the fainthearted. A lot of prep work is done by both seasoned and emerging entrepreneurs in advance of the 24 hours to ensure every waking hour delivers value for the emerging entrepreneurs. The early trust that is established between all 48 entrepreneurs is a key ingredient to the programme's success.

Trust forms the foundation for openness and honesty from the outset. This isn't a "high-fiving" start-up event where success is marked by the number of failures one has notched up, or the amount of money you have raised. Nor is it a posh networking event. It is about adding value, and the seasoned entrepreneurs must deliver. Their previous successes do not guarantee success at the Entrepreneur Experience.

In those 24 hours, they must get close to the emerging entrepreneurs they are teamed up with and quickly establish the drivers, blockers and ultimate potential of their businesses. The seasoned entrepreneurs are not chosen on their successes alone, but because we see their proven ability to share their advice, learnings and experiences.

The experience takes the entrepreneurs on a 24-hour journey of reflection and analysis, critiquing themselves as entrepreneurs, and their businesses. Many have never stopped to spend time working "on their business" and not "in their business" before.

The seasoned entrepreneurs ask the often uncomfortable but essential questions. It can be a rollercoaster for the entrepreneurs, with words used to describe the emotions of the experience including: intense, honest, open, focused, demanding, draining, thorough, revealing, relieving, exciting, frustrating, liberating, engaging, insightful, anger, practical, worrying and real.

But at the end of the experience, all 24 emerging entrepreneurs will take implementable changes back into their businesses. From tweaks to radical changes, from greater focus to less fear, the learnings make a difference.

Trends

The interviewing process is revealing and provides valuable insights into entrepreneurship trends in Ireland.

What trends are we seeing across the 100 emerging entrepreneurs who applied for the programme this year?

Increasing confidence

Despite the surprises of 2016, which included Brexit and the Trump election, Irish entrepreneurs are becoming more positive in their outlook. The number of applications for the programme has risen every year as we see more companies not just starting out, but scaling up. Philosophically, entrepreneurs are focused on "controlling the controllables" and positioning themselves to cope with the changes outside their control.

International perspective

The entrepreneurs are becoming more worldly in their commercial outlook every year. They don't let distance, borders, cultural or language barriers stand between them and their goals. Business plans often focus on the international opportunity before the domestic one. Brexit has resulted in their export and international ambition moving beyond Britain.

Ability to change

The next generation of leading entrepreneurs are very aware of the speed and quantum of change taking place in the world – whether it be technological, political, social or economic. This has developed an urgency to execute quickly and constantly evolve to stay ahead. The cultures they are building embrace change and have the flexibility to deal with it.

In the detail

Every year, the quality of the entrepreneur's research and plans improve. I see the increasing availability of, and access to, help and advice nationwide through organisations such as the BICs (Business Innovation Centres), LEOs (Local Enterprise Offices), Enterprise Ireland, Invest Northern Ireland and InterTradeIreland as a key driver of these improvements. The entrepreneurial ecosystems are growing, which benefit all entrepreneurs.

The traits

No two entrepreneurs are the same, but the successful ones often share common characteristics and traits. We have found a number of common characteristics across the final 24 selected for the 2017 programme.

Ambition

The journey of an entrepreneur can be a lonely one. It's a tough road and without high levels of ambition and determination, the risks of quitting along the way are high. We saw great ambition in all 24 emerging entrepreneurs. They tend to share an impatience and drive essential to succeed. They want to win and realise the personal pain which failure would bring.

Self-awareness

Having a high degree of self-awareness is essential for entrepreneurs and particularly those participating in the Entrepreneur Experience.

Great entrepreneurs are not just aware of where their talents shine, but also where their weaknesses lie, and they either work on them or surround themselves with people with different skillsets to form well-rounded, high-performance teams.

Flexible

Change is expected. Change is embraced. Change brings opportunity. A lot of modern entrepreneurs see change as exciting and focus on maintaining high degrees of flexibility in their businesses to enable them to respond quickly to changes.

Examples of this include their development of partnerships and collaborations to support efficient scaling.

The seasoned entrepreneurs

To date, more than 60 of Ireland's leading entrepreneurs, including Jim Barry (Barry Group), John Flaherty (C&F Group), Johnny Walker (Health Founders), Peaches Kemp (itsa), Larry Bass (ShinAwil), Pádraig Ó Ceidigh (formerly Aer Aran), Gráinne Kelly (Bubblebum) and Mary McKenna (Tour America), have all given their time generously to the programme. Their commitment to helping emerging entrepreneurs is a testament to the character of Irish business leaders. We appreciate it.

Pete Smyth is founder of Broadlake and captain of the 2017 Entrepreneur Experience. Follow him on Twitter @BroadlakePete; broadlake.ie

next big thing



Aoibhean O'Brien of FoodCloud: the food outlets use its technology to alert local charities to left-over food



Antonio Ruzzelli of Wattics

strength to strength and now occupies a 10,000 square foot purpose-built bakery, which was built by Denise's husband, Derek. The company took on business angels to build the facility, which was done with the support of Enterprise Ireland.

The business works with the Irish multiples and food service sector while also exporting to Britain, France and Italy. The company has ambitious plans to extend its reach further in Europe and to open new markets in 2017. It also has a new range of products coming to market in 2017 and its cookery school opens its doors this year, due to the demand for one-to-one classes with O'Callaghan.

Wattics

Antonio Ruzzelli

Antonio Ruzzelli has the sort of academic qualifications that would make most university lecturers envious: a Master's in electrical engineering, a PhD in computer science from UCD and a higher diploma in international selling from DIT.

Now, the former Philips engineering executive is attempting to put all the academic knowledge into real-life business. His company, Wattics, sells online software that measures the savings delivered by energy-efficient equipment. The product allows businesses to analyse energy consumption online, therefore allowing them to change behaviour and make savings.

Wattics has helped a number of indigenous Irish companies to reduce their energy bills, including Grant Engineering, Slaney Foods, Jurys Inn and Centra.

It has also linked up internationally, working with utilities and energy consultants in more than 30 countries as partner channels. Ruzzelli has won a string of awards, including the Globe Forum Innovator award in 2011 and the Electric Ireland sustainability award in 2012. He led Wattics to receive the InterTrade Ireland 2012/13 All-Ireland Emerging Business Award.

The Entrepreneur Experience is sponsored by Bank of Ireland, Cork County Council, Cork City Council, Grant Thornton, HOMS Solicitors and The Sunday Business Post

Learnaboutgmp

Graham O'Keeffe

Graham O'Keeffe is the founder of Learnaboutgmp, an online regulatory and compliance training platform for life sciences organisations.

O'Keeffe believes in the power of an engaged online community and harnessing that expertise to provide training globally. Learnaboutgmp provides knowledge and expertise that allows life sciences organisations to grow faster and remain in an ongoing state of compliance. It has created a proprietary instructional design and technology process that is already creating waves.

In January, Learnaboutgmp received a big vote of confidence when the Azzur Group, a private equity firm with interests in the life sciences industry, took a significant stake in the business.

Lowflo

Charles Dwyer

Charles Dwyer is managing director of Lowflo, an up-and-coming business with a blue-chip client roster and an ambition to scale internationally.

The company was established in 2006 and provides a water management and leak detection service for industrial, local authority and domestic markets. The company's service is being used nationwide in Ireland and

in the Middle East.

The company has offices in Dublin and Cork, and its client portfolio includes GlaxoSmithKline, Pfizer, GMC, Irish Distillers, Health Service Executive, Dalata Hotels, IDA, Kerry Group and Deloitte.

Outside Ireland, Lowflo has worked on projects such as in the Water Authority of Jordan, Sabic Oil refinery in Saudi Arabia, and most recently, Lajes US Airforce Base in the Azores.

Dwyer is chairman of the Water and Environmental Society of Engineers Ireland, and has won the Tim Sexton Memorial Prize from Cork Institute of Technology. He was recently shortlisted for green entrepreneur of the Year 2017 at the Green Environment Awards 2017.

RE:SURE

John MacMahon and Emmet Hogan

John MacMahon and Emmet Hogan became friends at Bective rugby club in Dublin. In 2013 they became business partners when they launched RE:SURE, a technology company that aims to modernise home and business security.

MacMahon is a mechanical engineer with an MBA from Smurfit Business School, while Hogan previously worked in the OHM Group, an Irish company that distributes internationally recognised brands and prestige

products.

Having decided that traditional security methods were either too expensive (security guards) or no longer fit for purpose (an intruder alarm), the pair established RE:SURE to fill the void in the market.

RE:SURE specialises in external detection of intruders with immediate audio intervention. The company aims to prevent the crime, and not just alert the victim that it is ongoing.

The company says its speciality is CCTV monitoring using Advanced Video Analytics, and it is a specialist in converting existing dumb (record-only) cameras into smart cameras. The company says these newly transformed cameras can detect people when they are on your property and then relay this information to its Control Centre.

Delicious Gluten Free Bakery

Denise O'Callaghan

Having working in investment banking in London and Dublin, Denise O'Callaghan took a complete career change in 2007 after her father was diagnosed as a coeliac. O'Callaghan moved back to Cork to set up Denise's Delicious Gluten Free Bakery, which was Ireland's first gluten-free bakery.

The company has grown from