

OUT *on your* OWN

Talking POINT



Elaine O'Regan

Valuable experience for new business owners

A unique approach to exporting is at the heart of a mentoring initiative that is pairing Irish SMEs and start-ups with senior peers in the multinational sphere.

The Ireland France Chamber of Commerce (IFCC) launched Business Bureau last year, and will this week choose three participants for the 2013 programme.

They will each get their own mentor, who will liaise with them on a one-to-one basis over the course of the six-month scheme.

The IFCC said the initiative was unique because it gave owner-managers direct access to the advice and insights of senior representatives from some of Europe's largest companies.

Last year's Business Bureau mentors comprised IFCC council members and patrons, including Renault Ireland's Eric Basset, Pierre Eymery of Veolia Water, Alstom's Niall Gleeson and Gerry Halpenny, a partner at LK Shields solicitors and IFCC president.

They each get their own mentor

"The aim of the programme is to facilitate the sharing of business knowledge between members, whereby business development challenges can be discussed and supported confidentially," said Cliona McGowan, IFCC director and Business Bureau co-founder.

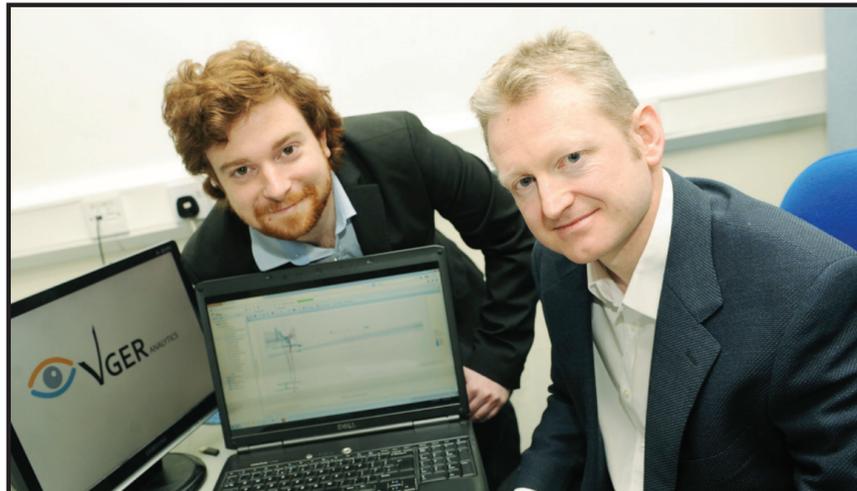
Brian Ó hOisín, director of jobs fair Career Zoo, was one of the IFCC members who took part in last year's Business Bureau.

He was mentored by Pierre Eymery, managing director of Veolia Water Ireland, and Mathieu Gorge, chief executive of information security firm VigiTrust. Having joined the IFCC in 2011, Ó hOisín said the initiative provided a valuable opportunity to a start-up to get advice from experienced businesspeople on issues like strategy formulation, new markets and forging new relationships.

For more, see irelandfrance.com



Intern Andreina Pérez with David Palmer, Fenestra Pro co-founder



Intern John Gallagher with Cormac Rafferty, founder, Dataware

TONY O'SHEA

Interns off to a flying start

New research on internships in start-up firms shows these placements can be hugely beneficial for both the intern and the company, writes Siobhán Brett

Internships can provide start-ups on a budget with access to cutting-edge graduate skills, while allowing placements to benefit from valuable business experience at the heart of small and flexible outfits.

This is according to new research carried out among high-potential start-ups participating in the New Frontiers Entrepreneur Development Programme run out of Dublin Institute of Technology's Hothouse incubator.

Formerly known as the Hothouse Venture Programme, New Frontiers provides entrepreneurs with mentoring, office and incubation facilities in Dublin and introductions to seed and early-stage capital investment networks.

According to new research carried out among New Frontier's participants, they have together taken on 30 interns in the past six months.

The Engines of Employment survey also found that, with clear delegation of work and the right blend of autonomy and mentoring, internships could be very fruitful for both the start-up and the intern.

Seventy-five per cent of the start-ups that had taken on interns were satisfied that they had filled specific skills gaps, the report said. All of the respondents said they would consider their interns prime candidates for future openings.

JobBridge

National internship scheme JobBridge was the most common means of sourcing interns, according to half of the respondents in the Engines of Employment survey.

However, not all were happy with the way in which the scheme operates – particularly its stipulation that the number of placements per company be restricted to a one-intern-per-ten-employee ratio.

The rule applies indiscriminately to businesses, which means that small outfits are limited in who they can take on, respondents said.

Others took issue with the requirement that interns were required to have been on the dole for a set period before they were eligible to apply for a JobBridge placement.

Of his own participation in the JobBridge scheme, intern John Gallagher said: "Government needs to

get feedback faster and start changing it faster, especially if it is going to be expanded. The ratio requirement really doesn't make sense for start-ups. The interns that want to work for start-ups really want to; they're being inhibited by the system."

Dataware

John Gallagher took up an internship with high-tech start-up Dataware late last year and will remain with the company for six months. Gallagher is currently completing Dublin Business School's ICT conversion course, while Dataware is building a cloud-based solution for manufacturing companies, designed to bring a more analytical approach to the supply chain.

Since taking on Gallagher, Dataware has recruited a second intern, Majid Ghanbari. However, founder Cormac Rafferty agreed with Gallagher that the parameters laid out for employers in JobBridge were not clear enough.

"John and I were both very confused about the parameters of JobBridge initially," he said. "It needs to be cleared up."

Despite this, Rafferty said internships could give start-ups valuable access to much-needed skills and qualifications.

"We knew what needed doing, but didn't have time to do it. [Our interns'] backgrounds are very pertinent to things going well. I am not sure I've tapped into their potential at all as yet," he said.

Gallagher, 25, said the opportunity to work with a young company was an attractive prospect.

"There is definitely a lot of variation," he said of his role. "The thing now is big data, and that is what this company does. It is in the right area and the work is interesting."

"Starting out at a low level, I get to see everything and I can try to contribute to it. Everything I've done so far in here, pretty much everything, has been new to me. Now, I don't really like the idea of going into a job and doing the same thing over and over."

Hostelbench

Software consultant Fergal McCarthy set up Hostelbench in 2011 as a benchmarking service to al-

Structured approach is crucial

Defined roles and responsibilities are crucial to ensuring the success of any internships, according to Andrew Considine, co-founder of online start-up Willstream.

"Lay out expectations, responsibilities and objectives. If there is any vagueness in the beginning, it becomes pointless for both parties," he said.

Willstream provides online and mobile payment services to emerging markets as an alternative to the traditional method of wiring money. The idea, said Considine, was to give senders a more convenient and reliable means to send money to their intended recipient, be it a clinic, school, supermarket or utility provider.

Considine has had several interns in recent months, most recently mature student Bridget Greene, a recent graduate of the National College of Ireland's ICT conversion course.

"Bridget originally did an IT course, worked for ten years in banking and took herself back to do a refresher degree," said Considine. Greene first graduated in 2001 with a degree in computer and software engineering, just before the dotcom slump. Last year, she decided to give ICT another go.

"I had just bought a house and paying for a degree course was out of the question," said



Andrew Considine, co-founder of online start-up Willstream, and intern Bridget Greene

TONY O'SHEA

Greene. "The timing of the launch by government of the ICT conversion course couldn't have been better for me. The idea of getting involved in a start-up really appealed."

Considine took on two college-age interns

last summer. "Great guys, but a lot younger, 19, 20 years old," he said. "They were really, really hard-working, but Bridget's experience made a massive difference to the way she works and our ability to gain traction."



Fergal McCarthy, Hostelbench founder, with intern Niall Clancy

TONY O'SHEA

low hostels to compare success rates.

Hostelbench signed an alliance with an Israeli firm earlier this month to act as a global distributor for the online service. To get to this stage, McCarthy has taken on an intern, Niall Clancy.

At 26, Clancy has degrees in architecture and civil engineering. Website building is his hobby – one he said he could successfully market to prospective employers.

"Hook, line and sinker, I bought it," said McCarthy. "There are so many excellent candidates out there. From a human level, it is not great to

with a start-up meant exposure to a broader range of business activities than a similar placement with a multinational might.

"We want to be a business dog wagging a technical tail, rather than the opposite," he said.

"A company without a sound business plan won't get on, no matter how good your tech is. I've got that philosophy now."

Fenestra Pro

One of the companies questioned for the survey was Fenestra Pro, a developer of software for architects.

"We have developed a very strong prototype," said co-founder David Palmer. "Within six months, we hope to have our first version live in UK. In a year, we should have sales traction."

Research into the viability of the product, part of Palmer's postgraduate degree in facade engineering, began a year and a half ago.

"Our software speeds up modelling and analysis in architecture," said Palmer. "We went to DubStarts [a start-up jobs fair] in search of software and development students who could work with us to take the prototype to MVP."

"We came across Andreina Perez, an architect who is researching day-

light design, which is a massive part of what we do. She has a good grasp of multimedia, web, SEO. The ideal candidate presented herself."

Fenestra Pro is in the process of raising seed capital. Soon, it will come off Enterprise Ireland's New Frontiers programme and begin angling for HPSU status.

Palmer said that, while the company was benefiting from an extra pair of hands, he liked to think the business was also giving Perez a chance to gain experience in a niche area relevant to her.

"We don't want to take somebody on and leave them hanging around," he said. "An intern has a time requirement, and we don't have a lot of time. We are pre-funding and we are very conscious that Andreina's working for nothing – it would be different otherwise."

"You are doing an intern a massive disservice if you take them on to pile the admin on. If you've got a good intern, they are not going to stick about if you do that."

Perez said the work was challenging and she took it very seriously.

"I am learning a lot, and I'm putting my skills into practice," she said. "I have some say in decision-making and I have the website to show for my work – it is a great working environment."

The LOWdown Tips for start ups



Gillian Slattery

This week: Think Outside The Box Awards

By Gillian Slattery

While work placements like those above offer third-level graduates an important route into paid employment, we are also encouraging ambitious and enterprising students to "think outside the box" by setting up their own ventures.

We have set up our Think Outside The Box awards to do just that, offering third-level students with great business ideas the opportunity

to win an overall €30,000 cash prize fund, including a first prize of €10,000, as well as a consultancy fund of €30,000.

The Think Outside The Box awards, co-sponsored by Invest Northern Ireland, Cruickshank Intellectual Property Attorneys, Grant Thornton and Intel, are open to all full-time third-level students on the island of Ireland.

This group represents a seedbed for future business start-ups, and last year's winning team from NUI Galway was a great example of the commercial potential for student entrepreneurs.

The team's idea – DRS.ie – is a

drag reduction device for trucks that helps to reduce fuel consumption significantly. It has already attracted significant commercial interest and the team has gone on to win €50,000 funding from Enterprise Ireland's Competitive Start Fund to develop the product further.

If you decide to enter this year, your idea must be yours and no one else's. The more original the better, because it means that we, as sponsors, will be better able to protect your product or service with ease and get you on the road to starting your own business quickly.

Before applying, consider the following:

1. Project concept. Is the proposed product or service innovative or an import substitution? Is it feasible and is there a market for it?

2. Planning and projections. Has the market been thoroughly researched and potential competitors identified? Have the capital investment and operational cash requirements been identified and estimated realistically?

3. Professional approach. Have all aspects of the business been fully considered and are the necessary practical skills in place to deliver on the concept?

4. Presentation. Is the submission presented clearly and in an easy-to-

read format?

Regional executives from Enterprise Ireland will be presenting the details of the competition to all colleges and institutions between now and April 24, 2013, the closing date for applications.

The Enterprise Ireland Think Outside the Box awards will hold a closing ceremony of the best national ideas at the NUI Galway in June.

Gillian Slattery is a regional development executive with Enterprise Ireland. For more on the awards, see www.thinkoutsidetheboxawards.com