

OUT *on your* OWN

Talking POINT

ICE is heating things up in the border region

Innovation. It's seen as a must-have for forward thinking companies in the knowledge economy, but is more often than not a "would-like" for start-ups and other micro-ventures for which the day-to-day running of a business is all-consuming.

We would all like to innovate – to maximise potential with new and inventive products and services – but who has the time, and what about the money?

An Innovation Learning Programme (ILP) developed for SMEs at Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT) is seeking to address this problem by giving small businesses free access to innovation tools, supports and guidance.

DkIT's Regional Development Centre (RDC) is running the Innovation for Competitive Enterprises (Ice) Programme in conjunction with Galway's Team BDS, with the aim of helping small businesses in the border counties that have the potential to grow, but lack the necessary skills or experience to innovate and develop.

Ninety companies have taken part in Ice – 30 each year since 2011.

DkIT is collaborating with the University of Ulster, the University of Glasgow, and Glasgow Caledonian University on the initiative. ICE is funded to the tune of €2.49 million by the INTERREG IVA Programme for Ireland, the North and Western Scotland, administered by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).

Now, as this year's final cohort of thirty companies near the end of their ICE run, programme manager Kieran Fegan is keen to raise awareness of the bottom line benefits the scheme has to offer Ireland's wider SME economy.

"ICE has easily beaten the targets set for it by the funder SEUPB," said Fegan. "The targets for the number of new products and processes introduced, the number of companies increasing turnover and the number increasing export sales, have all been exceeded by a factor of four or more already prior to programme completion."

"ICE has been good value for money too with a direct cost per job created or safeguarded of just €4,500."

"If the reduction in state benefits arising from the increase in employment from the programme was taken into account, the net cost to the state would be negative."

Fegan described ICE as a free 12-month, in-company ILP that provides expert training to companies on their own premises as well as access to expert resources and the experiences of other participants.



Elaine O'Regan

ICE participants typically take part in 10 to 12 "action-based" learning sessions. Each one is given a customised innovation plan designed to help them develop new services, processes or business models, facilitate technology transfers and extend their market reach.

"There are six group innovation development sessions per year when, where possible, all companies from the three regions are brought together to address a collective knowledge deficit and to share knowledge and experiences," said Fegan.

"The In-House Innovation Learning Programme was core, but companies were also able to tap into regional expertise, third level institutes and business support agencies."

Participating companies are not required to develop their own products or services. Instead, Ice facilitates access to new technology transfer and licensing opportunities through academia and other sources.

An interim independent evaluation of the programme, carried out by Belfast's RSM McClure Watters, found that ICE was on course to increase the combined revenues of 90 participating companies to €56 million, generating 300 new jobs.

Among the first 30 companies that completed the programme in 2011, RSM McClure Watters found that 103 new jobs had been created (or existing jobs safeguarded).

Thirteen of the participating companies increased export sales, 34 new products were developed and ten licensing and technology transfer opportunities were realised.

"Companies are left with knowledge of how to manage further innovation," said Fegan. "They have an improved ability to participate in mainstream government innovation programmes."

ICE Conference: Improving Company Performance through Innovation will take place in Dublin Castle on Tuesday, October 8. For more, see iceprogramme.com

Referral Institute puts its network on an Irish footing

Six years after it began operating here, the US-owned Referral Institute has just launched its first Irish franchise in Dublin, writes Elaine O'Regan



Alan Bell, Dublin South director of training for the Referral Institute: 'When you have a powerful message about yourself, it starts to tell you a lot more about who your customers could be'

The Referral Institute, a US-owned referral training organisation, has launched its first Irish franchise in Dublin.

This month's official launch of Referral Institute Dublin South will put the organisation's Irish operations on a formal franchised footing for the first time in the six years since it first began operating here.

Alan Bell, Dublin South's director of training, said the franchise structure would support plans to expand the institute's Irish footprint region by region.

He said the institute's structured training programmes aimed to teach people how to use the referral process as part of a wider marketing strategy – as a means to generate business.

"Referral marketing is a business strategy to attract new business and clients through a process of relationship-building. When it works at a high level, it results in a slow, ongoing flow of personally recommended business," he said.

For most people, Bell said referral marketing amounted to a happy accident. "Somebody might say: 'You should talk to that guy'. That is your one-off referral that most people get. Your proper referral marketing is literally a thoroughly constructed business

strategy that attracts an ongoing flow of new business through relationship-building with the right people."

The Referral Institute has its roots in the US, where it was established in 2002 by Ivan Misner and partner Mike Macedonio, both of whom were already involved in Business Network International.

"The idea is to identify a small number of people in your current network that could actually refer you at a very high level, but you probably don't know it yet," said Bell.

"Most people out there are looking to expand their network and they're out networking and meeting more people, stockpiling loads of business cards and expanding out their network. They're actually diluting its effectiveness."

"What really works is reducing down your networking to a very small number of key people – we're talking three, four or five – and you invest most of your networking ef-

forts and most of our relationship-building with just that small number."

The Referral Institute's aim was to help clients to identify these relationships, Bell said. "The sequence of events is that it starts with you. You step back from everything and forget about sales, business and referrals, and you explore your own reasons for being in business in the first place."

"You have a really thorough look at why it is that you do what you do."

"Then, you must really learn how to communicate that very effectively so that it will inspire people to want to refer you. You start with yourself and you come up with your story about why you are referable. When you've got that in place, you can then identify who your serious customers could actually be."

"When you have a powerful message about yourself, it starts to tell you a lot more about who your customers

could be."

Before they could find their referral partners, Bell said companies needed to first identify their high-end customers. "Typically, your best referral partners are business contacts, but they are not necessarily clients," he said.

"The least effective referral you can get is where someone who has worked with you will recommend you to someone else."

"Ideally, your referral partner will personally introduce you to somebody they know who has a very current and high-level need for what you do. You're being introduced at the point where there is an immediate need for your product or service."

Trust was key to referral marketing, Bell said. "That's the whole point. It is a long-term plan and it's all about putting down the platform for long-term success. It's not just about winning and dining and doing favours, although that is

part of it. Referral marketing is all about people helping people to achieve their business goals – it is about a serious investment in the success of somebody else."

Bell began training for the Referral Institute in Ireland in 2007 after he inadvertently stumbled across a referral marketing workshop.

"I was involved in generating business for a web design company through networking and I was quite effective and successful in some networking groups," he said.

"Somewhat by accident, I came across a Referral Institute workshop. It just really stopped me in my tracks about how strategic and effective strategic referral marketing could be and, two years after that, the opportunity to become one of the first people to bring the training to Ireland came my way."

The institute runs three-hour, full- and half-day training programmes. Its core 12-

week programme, Certified Networker, costs €3,600.

"That is our knowledge base – and everything is centred around it," said Bell. "It's typically done as a three-hour session once a week over 12 weeks. That then gets repeated in such a way that it is tailored to a business with consulting sessions in between the classes."

"We then have supporting activities for people to apply the knowledge that they get in Certified Networker in the real world. Some offer people an opportunity to experience the content before they would commit to an intensive programme."

"There are stand-alone activities, where people get a real sense of what referral marketing is all about. Pipeline, for instance, (a one-day sales pipeline seminar, during which participants schedule appointments with qualified prospects), is only something a very experienced client would do."

The LOWdown Tips for start ups

This week: clarity

By Shane Cradock

In today's difficult economic climate, it's essential to have your wits about you in business. Clarity – a clear vision for your business, and where you want it to go – is vital. It is also important to know when you need to stop, rest and clear your mind.

Change can create clouds of confusion for many, but leadership is all about vision – knowing what you want to

create – and clarity precedes good decisions. So how clear are you? If you have hit a brick wall, here are some tips on how to clear your mind and start again.

■ **Stop.** Get away from work and the very thing you're trying to clarify. Paradoxically, when you step back from the situation, you create space for clarity to come in. That is one of the reasons hobbies are so useful. They help you to switch off and see things differently.

■ **Write it down.** Having it all in your head can be like stirring a bucket of water with sand in it. By writing it down, you get it out of your head and



Shane Cradock

that alone can give the sand a chance to settle, so you can see more clearly.

■ **Change location.** It might

sound odd, but taking yourself to a new location, can be all you need to work through a problem. Coffee shops are my favourite places for clarity and creativity.

■ **Say no, more often.** Most leaders have too much on their agendas. Saying no to opportunities, however good, leaves space for the better opportunities to develop. When you have less on your plate, clarity emerges.

■ **Hire a coach.** Some people can force you into clarity. Everyone has blind spots, and using a professional can help you to identify what you need to focus on for best results.

■ **Get clear on who you are, and what your business is about.** When you are clear on your values as a person, and those of your company, it's easier to know what to focus on.

■ **Rest.** Confusion is often caused by physical and mental exhaustion. Be aware enough to listen to your body. Your mind may want to keep working, but sometimes resting completely – for example, by switching off the phone and laptop – is the best tonic for your mind and, by default, your clarity.

■ **Walk in the present.** One of my favourite ways to gain

clarity is to go for a slow walk, completely drop what I was thinking about, and give my full attention to what's around me then and there.

■ **Get to where the air is good.** I have definitely noticed a link between my quality of thinking and the quality of the air in my environment. It is especially noticeable in a forest, in the mountains, and also by the sea.

Shane Cradock is a high-performance and growth adviser to business owners and author of the motivational book *Inspire Me*. See shane.cradock.com



Three.ie

Are you the commander-in-chief of your business?

Fancy unlimited calls and texts?

YES YES

And All You Can Eat Data?

YES YES

Like the flexibility of a 30 day contract?

YES YES

And do you REALLY like reducing costs?

YES YES