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Pictures: John Allen

Clocking up real experience

The 2017 Entrepreneur Experience offered 24 talented emerging entrepreneurs 24 hours of intense mentoring from 24 of Ireland's leading entrepreneurs. Here are some of the key insights from the CorkBIC event held in Ballymaloe House, writes **Pete Smyth**

The 2017 Entrepreneur Experience matched 24 of Ireland's leading entrepreneurs with 24 of Ireland's most talented emerging entrepreneurs for 24 hours of intense mentoring. The seasoned entrepreneurs gave their time generously and their insights openly, helping the emerging entrepreneurs with advice and guidance on their journeys. Entrepreneurship can be a lonely road and real-world practical advice that most entrepreneurs crave is often difficult to source. This is an event "by entrepreneurs for entrepreneurs", which focuses on providing advice and guidance based on personal experiences. At this CorkBIC-organised event, there is no room for textbook theory, advice must be tangible and an emphasis placed on the practical execution of plans.

In its seventh year, the 2017 programme attracted entrepreneurs from over 20 different sectors; from biotech to food, security to distilling and software to fashion. With such variety, one would expect the learnings to be industry-specific but, in fact, the opposite is the case.

Year in, year out, this event proves the challenges facing scaling companies are remarkably similar regardless of their sector. There were a lot of things to learn from the weekend, but issues of note that resonated with a lot of the entrepreneurs are as follows:

Clarity: The importance of being clear in everything you are doing. This is vitally important in fast-growing businesses where lots of people (staff, customers etc) need to be brought on your journey. Clarity is only useful and truly clear if communicated correctly.

Responsibility of the leader: A leader is more than a boss. To be a great leader, you need to be more than a great manager. Leadership requires work. Leadership is about what you do more than what you say.

Scalability: Establish early if your business has the scalability to match your ambition. Sometimes an entrepreneur's plans are too narrow or niche in focus to scale to the size they desire. Don't wait until you grow to figure out the big fish, small pond conundrum.

Ability to learn: A skill that has never been as important as today with the speed of change occurring in the world. The ability to learn is strongly linked to

the ability to change. Utopia is building both as organisational-wide capabilities.

All 48 entrepreneurs left the event physically drained but commercially energised and ready to put their learning into practice. Contrary to perception, the seasoned entrepreneurs gain and learn a lot from the emerging entrepreneurs over the 24 hours. Regardless of their stage of development, deep down they are 48 entrepreneurs with a common drive to do great things.

Below are short reflections from some of them: Peaches Kemp, a seasoned entrepreneur who gained recognition for her contributions to entrepreneurship by being welcomed into the Entrepreneur Experience Hall of Fame this year, and Joe O'Sullivan, who joined the event for the first time. Two of the emerging entrepreneurs on the programme this year also share their experiences.

Peaches Kemp

Co-founder of Itsa

Every year at the Entrepreneur Experience, the bar is raised and this year was no different. I am an entrepreneur in the food industry and I have seen the fast casual dining landscape change at light speed pace in the last five years.

International food, speciality coffee, healthy eating and special dietary requirements are all at centre stage of the customer's thinking when it comes to deciding where to spend their money. At the Entrepreneur Experience, the two food industry participants had products that focused on health and special dietary requirements, clearly reflecting the desires of a more educated and nutritionally aware customer. They are very much on trend with their innovations.

The theme this year was "Make It Count". It always amazes me that despite so many of the participants being in such varied industries, the stories, the challenges, the thought processes and the general modus operandi of entrepreneurs are all remarkably similar.

Peer-to-peer advice is to surround yourself with a great team, to continually work on being a strong and focused leader and to push on in the face of huge challenges and adversity. I expect that like many others, I have come away from The Entrepreneur Experience last weekend even more focused and determined than when I walked through its doors 24 hours earlier, with a renewed belief that



Sean Ganley of Westbrite and John Flaherty of C&F Group



Joe O'Sullivan, founder and chief executive of Ophir Manufacturing Solutions

the future of innovation and industry in Ireland is strong and bright. I intend to Make It Count.

Sean Ganley

Chief executive and co-founder of Westbrite Technologies

Westbrite Technologies has invented and patented a photocell lighting control technology which turns streetlights into an internet of things platform for smart cities. Westbrite's Closed Camera Photocell (CCPC) plugs into any streetlight, creating a canopy-top network for IoT-enabled smart solutions.

There are two major trends driving the street-lighting industry – the move to energy-efficient LED lighting and the rollout of smart lighting solutions. Local authorities are clamouring for a data-gathering edge device to optimise energy-efficiency, transport and traffic, public safety, and other public services. Utilising existing streetlight infrastructure is the optimal path to enabling smart cities as it is already installed, powered and connected, and lies unused for most of the day.

The Entrepreneur Experience was a golden opportunity for me to learn



Peaches Kemp, co-founder of Itsa

ceived from the mentors about our technology and the advice we received about marketing approaches, strategic partnerships and scaling our manufacturing will undoubtedly contribute to Westbrite's global expansion.

Joe O'Sullivan

Founder and chief executive of Ophir Manufacturing Solutions

There are no rules in start-ups. The US and specifically Silicon Valley does not have a monopoly on entrepreneurship. According to CB Insights data released recently in the US, it is in fact rural counties that have higher rates of self-employed business proprietors over metropolitan areas, with the highest rate per 1,000 residents in population areas of less than 2,500 people not adjacent to a metropolitan area. This is 79 per cent higher than a metropolitan area of 1 million people or more.

At the Entrepreneur Experience in Ballymaloe, this statistic was clearly manifesting as the groups of early entrepreneurs, investor-ready entrepreneurs and scaling entrepreneurs joined with a tremendous cross-section of experienced (seasoned) entrepreneurs, giving 1/1 mentoring sessions that lasted up to five hours, group sessions with eight emerging and eight seasoned entrepreneurs, pitching sessions and plenary sessions.

I am involved with incubators and accelerators in London, San Francisco and Singapore. This was my first time participating in Ireland and I was incredibly impressed with the level of talent working on both sides of the table.

As a result of this meeting, I have bought a product from one of the investor-ready companies and I am actively engaged in sharing supplier and customer information with another. In addition, I am engaged with three other companies and considering investment in one. Ireland is alive and well and CorkBIC is doing a tremendous job identifying people and products and giving them a platform to succeed.

Nimesh Pinnamaneni

Chief executive of Helixworks

My co-founder, Sachin Chalapati, and I moved to Ireland from India nine months ago to live our destiny. Life is programmable. Helixworks is developing cutting-edge tools for genetic engineers, to help them build a society that is far more advanced than the one we currently live in.

Life would be barbaric without products made with genetic engineering. For example, all cheese in the world is made with the help of genetically engineered enzymes. It used to be that making cheese meant killing young cows – a few days old, at most. Enzymes secreted by the calf's stomach are now produced using microbes and brewed in vats, just like alcohol is brewed. Genetic engineering lets us eat cheese humanely.

When I was a kid, I hated being told that participation is more important than winning because every time I participated and lost, it was a bitter pill to swallow.

When I walked into Ballymaloe House at 9am, I wasn't prepared for what was about to unfold. I had flown out of London the previous night and reached Cork at 4am on the day of the event, slept for three hours and got up at 7am to get myself ready.

I knew I needed loads of coffee to get me through this 24 hours. What I did not expect was Broadlake's Pete Smyth. Pete was the strongest coffee at Ballymaloe House. In 20 minutes he had me going, ready to get it on. His message struck with me – #MakeItCount. No excuses, get it done!

Now my mind started to focus on the prize. We were due to meet the experienced entrepreneurs. These people have built one or more successful businesses and were still in the trenches every day. In my mind, most of them were capable of investing in Helixworks. They helped me refine my story and with that, I won the prize of "most investible company".

Pete Smyth is chief executive of Broadlake

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To be a great leader, you need to be more than a great manager. Leadership requires work

more about globally commercialising our product and scaling the business. I got access to some of the country's top entrepreneurs, and an unparalleled level of mentoring. Leaders in cleantech and technology openly shared their expertise, and offered key insights into how Westbrite can make our IoT technology pervasive.

The hugely positive reaction we re-