

EU FUNDING FOR FIVE INNOVATIVE IRISH WORKPLACE INITIATIVES

Cork City Council is one of four consortium partners of the European 'Start at Best' project, which is funding workplace innovation practices to support and drive competitiveness across the EU's SME sector. Five Irish SMEs recently received grant-aid of €7,500 each under the Horizon 2020 project to support their own workplace innovation initiatives.

Workplace innovation has emerged as a key driver for business competitiveness, according to Seamus Coghlan, Cork City Council's Head of Economic Development. "During the best of economic times, it has become an important consideration, and now during these Covid-19 times it has the potential to be a key tool for business recovery," he added.

With SMEs and micro-business in Ireland now facing an uncertain and challenging future, Coghlan said that any support which will help to re-orient business practices to improve productivity and thus competitiveness should be strongly encouraged.

Cork City Council's Head of Economic Development said research has shown that while there's significant variation in the types of workplace innovation practices (WPI) in companies, the process of why and how these practices are implemented shows considerable similarity.

"While the reasons for introducing WPI relate to efficiency, competitiveness and innovation, another positive result includes strengthening the working environment of employees and employee representatives.

"WPI outcomes, in the main, lead to an enhanced economic performance and a better quality of working life for all involved," he noted.

BETTER SUPPORT FOR SME SECTOR

The 'Start At Best' Horizon 2020 project has a total budget of €225,000 to support 30 individual companies or a consortium of firms and providers by allocating direct funding through grants of €7,500 (with no match funding required).

The project is aimed at regional and national innovation support agencies that design, implement and/or assist innovation support programmes for SMEs and micro-firms.

The aim is to contribute to the development of a European-led wave of workplace innovation among SMEs and to inspire small companies to adopt an innovative attitude towards business competitiveness.

Three national Open Calls

One Europe-wide Open Call

Total Budget of 225,000€

Individual grants of 7,500€

start at best
Workplace Innovation for Business Competitiveness

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FIVE IRISH SMEs RECEIVE WORKPLACE INNOVATION FUNDING

- Celnis Ltd
- CitySwift Ltd
- Petro Systems Management Ltd
- Polar Ice Ltd
- The Rubicon Innovation Centre @ CIT

“The project has included everyone. By supporting workplace innovation, policy makers can foster behavioral changes of stakeholders and end users. They can also drive this new revolution in a more balanced way – making sure this digital transformation is an opportunity for all and not only for some,” noted Chiara Frenca, Head of SERN Secretaria and Project Manager of Start at Best.

A statement specially prepared by the ‘Start at Best’ project team stated: “Workplace innovation is not just about the addition of IT infrastructure of changing up workplaces. It is seen across Europe as an increasingly popular way of empowering teams, building on their strengths, and embedding an innovation culture across the company or organisation. The need for workplace innovation has driven the acquisition of new technology (like a licence or a new collaboration platform tool).”

A KEY BUSINESS FUNCTION

The statement also noted: “It has very quickly become evident that the technology is only the tip of the iceberg and the real workplace innovation is rooted in a much bigger and more complex process, and is driven by internal champions, thinking strategically, and supporting staff in adapting to the disruptive changes.

“Workplace innovation should be viewed as a key business function



Workplace innovation has emerged as a key driver for business competitiveness

CASE STUDY 1 – Petro Systems Management Ltd

Petro Systems Management Ltd is one of Ireland’s leading suppliers of equipment and services to the forecourt industry. “We have always tried to innovate with the products and services that we provide as part of our ongoing continuous improvement programme,” according to Nora O’Leary, office manager.

“We would like to take this opportunity to thank Cork City Council for presenting us with this prestigious EU grant, and for helping us to realise our vision for this new and innovative, cloud-based platform.”

Over the past few months, she says that the company has been working hard in the background streamlining and taking their CRM and Operations Management processes online, to deliver a more transparent and more ‘real-time’ view of projects as they progress through their systems.

“All innovation takes courage and investment of time and money... so we are very happy that our innovation has been recognised at local and EU level, and that a special Start at Best grant has been awarded to us to help make all this happen,” Nora O’Leary noted.

“Drawing on the entrepreneurial atmosphere in the European Start-up scene, the objective is to attract more SMEs to jump aboard the innovation train! The main goal of the project, its partners and stakeholders, is to contribute to the development of a European-led new wave of workplace innovation among SMEs. Start-ups have initiated a new trend in workplace innovation which can inspire small companies to adopt a similar innovative attitude.”



CASE STUDY 2 – Polar Ice Ltd

Polar Ice was delighted to be a recipient of ‘Start at Best’ €7,500 funding, according to general manager Ronan Berry, adding that it allowed their business to react and adapt quickly to an entirely new way of working and managing operations from the company's base in Portarlinton, Co. Laois.

“The investment in IT equipment, training and software allowed for a seamless transition that continued right up to the end of the year and into 2021. We had applied for ‘Start at Best’ funding with guidance from Elizabeth Gavin and Sarah Adams of EUR Digital Village, a leading company on a mission to increase the value of EU funded projects managed by their clients.”

The following distinct areas of the business were identified, primarily in response to the seismic change to their ways of working entrusted on them by the first national lockdown due to Covid-19 in March 2020:

- * Assisting management and administration personnel in adapting to working from home
- * Investment in equipment, software and training in preparedness for virtual auditing
- * An employee well-being programme commencing with the transport team



Polar Ice has invested heavily in IT systems, infrastructure and security over the past four years so that the teams were ready to go remote if the need arose.

“Since March 2020 the management, administration and marketing teams have worked almost entirely from home in line with government guidelines. Nonetheless making the switch was still a major culture change but the team effort has allowed a seamless transition for customers, many of who found themselves in a similar situation.

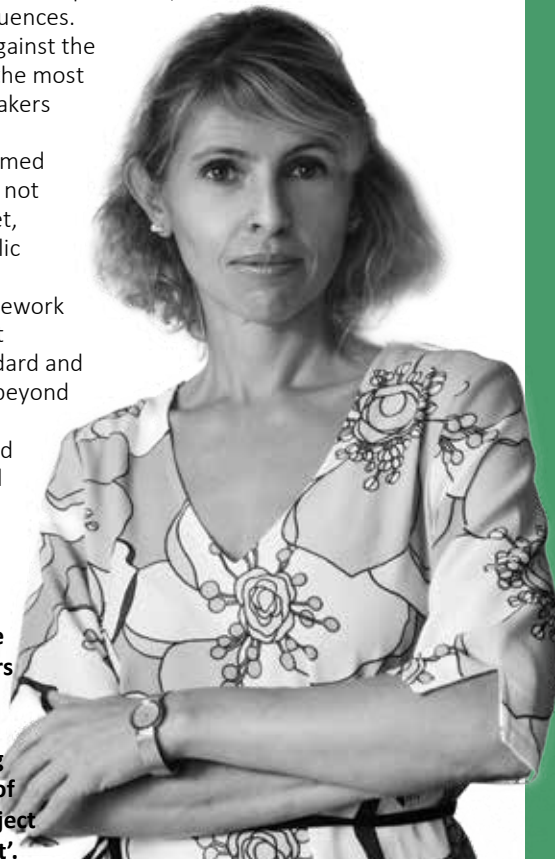
“The company immediately purchased additional hardware, phone and office equipment for the employees, and assisted them in upgrading their home broadband service to fibre broadband where accessible or the next best available technology,” Berry concluded.

delivering value for the employee as well as driving business growth. By its very nature, workplace innovation should always be the result of shared a continuous process and with buy-in across the entire organisation.

“Having looked at the process part, we shall also make some consideration on the policies implications, impact, and side-consequences. Inclusiveness and fight against the digital divide are one of the most important point policymakers shall look at workplace innovation: it shall be framed as an opportunity for all, not for some restricted target, like big corporate or public administration.

“The regulatory framework shall be clear, flexible but requiring minimum standard and common ground for all, beyond the national or regional borders. Finally, trust and safety in the system shall always come first: digital data vulnerability comes together with this digital revolution.”

By supporting workplace innovation, policy makers can foster behavioral changes of stakeholders and end users, according to Chiara Frencia, Head of SERN Secretaria and Project Manager of ‘Start at Best’.



‘START AT BEST’ CONSORTIUM PARTNERS

- **Cork City Council** is a partner in several EU projects across a number of different funding calls including Horizon 2020, Interreg Europe, Atlantic Area and URBACT. These projects help to advance the council’s knowledge of international best practice, promote transnational collaboration and to accelerate economic and community innovation activities for Cork. Current project themes include workplace innovation, SME innovation, smart cities, social innovation and engagement, energy efficiency and tourism.
- **SERN (Start-up Europe Regions Network)** is dedicated to providing start-up supports, and to reinforce the links between regional authorities, development agencies, universities and associations.
- **ANI** focuses on supporting technological and business innovation in Portugal. It contributes to the consolidation of the National Innovation System (SNI) and the competitiveness of the national economy in global markets. ANI also promotes collaboration between entities of the scientific and technological system and the business environment.
- **ART-ER** Attractiveness Research Territory is the Emilia-Romagna Joint Stock Consortium whose sole purpose is to foster the region’s sustainable growth by developing innovation and knowledge, attractiveness and internationalisation of the region system.

For full details visit <https://startatbest.eu>