Wild Geese
Stories of Irish business men and women around the world

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Uniting China and Ireland through ancient belief

Wild Geese: Sam McDaid of Qi Consultancy in Hong Kong

Fiona Alston

A chance meeting with a feng shui master in Hong Kong’s Man Mo temple led Donegal native Sam McDaid on to a rather different path than originally planned, but one she believes her grandmother had tried to teach her back in Ireland.

After studying fashion and textile design in Belfast and working in London as a designer for Ben Sherman, McDaid moved to Hong Kong eight years ago to teach at an international school. She is now dedicating all her spare time to her new company, incorporating all her learnings from the ancient to the modern.

“About three years ago, I walked into a very famous temple here called Man Mo. I met a master there. Master Ho read my face and told me I was in Hong Kong and I had come here to be a feng shui master,” she says. I started learning the principles behind five-element theory and then, from there, more seriously. Over the past two years I’ve studied [different areas of feng shui] form school and classical compass school. I’ve trained with one of the five grand masters in the world, Master Raymond Lo.”
While an ancient Chinese belief may be far from the priorities of Irish businesses, McDaid believes that by incorporating it into company policy, it could improve links between the two nations. Through Qi Consultancy she is doing just that.

"Many a corporation here sets aside a portion of their annual budget for feng shui consultation. I think it’s important from an Irish perspective for any Irish business or corporation seeking to work with the Chinese sector. It’s important they understand these cultural beliefs and guiding principles,” she says.

“I’ve availed of opportunities to work with the Irish community, local architectural and interior design firms and individuals in Hong Kong and Shanghai. I did a consultation for the consul general so our consul general, Peter Ryan, is sitting in a good mountain star. So hopefully relationships with China will be very good.”

Like with every belief, there are those who will call it “hocus-pocus”. McDaid admits that it is only now she is realising that this isn’t the first time someone has tried to teach her the elements of energy.

“My grandmother was a farmer and farmer’s wife. She always talked about the energy of the mountains and the sea. We kind of thought she was a little bit wacky as kids I suppose. Now that I’m older, I realise there are real health benefits of just being disconnected from technology and disconnected from your life generally. And spending some time taking your shoes off and standing on the grass and connecting all the energy that the Earth has got to give,” she says.

Hong Kong is a far cry from Donegal and now, even though she has residency status there, McDaid still seeks the simple pleasures from home.

“I have to consciously take myself to natural environments every so often. It’s a really big part of my identity, it’s a really big part of my experiences living in a positive way if I just take myself to the beach or go to the New Territories. In some parts, the New Territories remind me of Donegal, it’s quite mountainous and surrounded by sea,” she says.

According to McDaid, the low tax rate of 15 per cent is a major draw for expatriates to the island as well as it being a major transport hub. The one drawback would appear to be rental prices in both commercial and residential sectors.

“Although the taxes are really low, I guess then what we say in Hong Kong is that our rent becomes our tax because rent costs are incredibly high compared with Dublin, for example,” she says.
McDaid believes Hong Kong has great opportunities for new ideas, with many individuals looking for investment opportunities. She has recently been offered funding for a book that she is writing and says there are people willing to invest in you if your idea is good enough.

_Private investors_

“There are meets-ups, for example on a Tuesday morning, where you can go along and pitch the business idea to individuals who have money to invest in good ideas. I know people who have had private investors for business pursuits they have wanted to follow. It’s a very good place in that respect. There are a lot of very rich people who are keen to see a good idea come to fruition.”

McDaid is currently sourcing venues to bring her workshops to Europe with the first Dublin one at the end of July.

Eventually she would like to move back to her beloved Donegal and her long-term plan would be to build using the principles she has learned in Asia.

However, there are a few principles from the city she will be happy to leave behind. “One thing I actually miss about Ireland as well. You’re not allowed to sit on the grass here [in Hong Kong]. There are so many public parks but for some bizarre reason you’re not allowed to sit on the grass. There’s a whole list of what you’re not allowed to do,” she says.

_This article was first published in May 2016._
Clonakilty expat’s plan is to come full circle

Kate Crowley, Brisbane, Australia runs her own business ElleBelle Fit – an online fitness clothing retailer.

Ruth O’Connor

Even after five years living in Australia, it’s clear that Kate Crowley has strong ties to her home town. The Clonakilty native works as marketing and brand manager for engineering company Aecom while running her own business ElleBelle Fit – an online fitness clothing retailer.

Crowley studied law at University College Cork before moving to London upon graduation where she worked at law firm Dentons.

While she liked the company and it was a great opportunity, she says she feels that financial regulation probably wasn’t for her.

An opportunity arose when a company she had previously worked for – SouthWestern – offered her a role back in Cork to manage a team in an outsourcing company in a client relationship role. “It was a change and a huge opportunity to take on a management role in
my early twenties,” says Crowley. “I managed a team in Ireland and Poland for a number of years.”

In early 2011 Crowley and her then boyfriend (now husband) Paul Dillon made the decision to move to Australia. Dillon is a civil engineer and the downturn in the construction industry here meant that work had dried up for him.

“We were faced with the decision of whether to go back to London, try somewhere else in Europe or head out to Australia. We chose Australia, initially thinking of Melbourne,” says Crowley.

When Dillon received a job offer in Brisbane from leading property group Lendlease two weeks before departure, they bit the bullet and moved to the city.

“It took us between six and 12 months to settle in. We are used to coming from Clonakilty – a small town with a big community feel. It was foreign to us to know no one. We were forced out of our comfort zone and made more effort to make friends and get a better appreciation of the culture,” she says.

After a year or so, they began to share a house with friends from home nicknamed the “Clonakilty Hostel” as siblings and friends arrived to stay.

“We regret that we didn’t take a portrait photo of everyone who stayed on our couch from Clonakilty over the years,” she laughs. “Often we didn’t have enough pots and pans to cook for the numbers of people!”

Recent reports of drunken and disorderly behaviour by the Irish in Australia are, Crowley believes, limited to backpackers rather than professionals.

“Maybe some young people who are just in Australia to have a good time can be a little unreliable but in my experience, professional Irish people are well-respected and are known here as hard workers.”

Initially Crowley took her time to settle in. Prior to emigrating, the couple and some friends had established an events management company following a successful fundraising effort for injured rugby player Stuart Mangan, who subsequently passed away following complications from a spinal injury in 2009.

The event management group had then successfully organised the Clonakilty Waterfront Festival and Crowley had worked remotely on the marketing of some events from Brisbane.

“I wanted to do more marketing. In June 2011, I took a job in Aecom – one of the biggest engineering companies in the world where I am now marketing and brand manager for Queensland and the Northern Territories,” says Crowley. “I’ve wanted to do this role since I
started in Aecom and they are supporting me to do it on a part-time basis while I also run ElleBelle Fit,” she says of her online business established in 2015.

Crowley is currently working with Australian government departments and private companies as part of the Diversity in Infrastructure industry group examining actions to promote gender diversity in the industry including how to recruit and retain more women.

She works on her own business in the evenings and one or two full days a week.

“I do calls with suppliers throughout the day and manage the freelancers who work for me in areas such as video editing. My sister Eva also works for the business as marketing executive from Cork so I’ll FaceTime her.”

In her downtime, she works out and is trying her hand at meditation.

“I’ve a great network of friends here so one day a week I plug out and unwind. I like to travel a lot – up to my husband who’s currently working on a major road project in northern Queensland, spending time with my mother who works as a nurse in Melbourne and browsing the weekend markets in Brisbane.”

While Crowley says she loves the lifestyle and would definitely recommend Brisbane’s opportunities, it seems the couple’s hearts are still in Co Cork. “I think we will always move home. We have a strong tie to Clonakilty and the community there. We both said when we got back we want to go home to Clonakilty, rather than to a city, so we need to look at the career prospects and I’m hopefully building a business with ElleBelle Fit that can allow me to work from there on our eventual return.”

www.ellebellefit.com

This article was first published in May 2016.
‘I didn’t want to sit through a recession in Dublin’

Jewellery designer Jennifer Kinnear closed her shop in Temple Bar in 2009 and now lives in Spain

Ruth O’Connor

Jennifer Kinnear began making jewellery and selling it in Cow’s Lane Market in Dublin in 2001. In 2004 she opened her eponymous shop on Crow Street in Temple Bar and had several successful years in jewellery retail before recession hit and she got out – heading to Tarifa on the Costa de la Luz in Spain where she taught kite surfing, became a mother and is currently working to grow her jewellery brand once again.

Kinnear says her Dublin store was going well. She had cleared any loans she’d borrowed to establish the business and her profits were up year-on-year. Then she began to notice a change in consumer patterns.

“Just before Christmas 2007, I noticed that the increases from previous years weren’t as good. I sat in the shop on Christmas Eve and realised that something was off. I wasn’t sure what was happening but I decided to put a stop to spending.”
Kinnear started to keep a very close eye on her books and says it quickly became obvious that 2008 wasn’t going as well as previous years.


“It was a very difficult thing to do but I had to be realistic with myself. In hindsight, people have congratulated me on what I did because it took guts to close the shop.”

Business shelved

Kinnear says she didn’t want to sit through a recession in Dublin at the period she was at in life.

“I was in my early 30s, I had no kids, I could see the recession coming and I always thought I could go back to the jewellery when things turned around,” she says. “You might be doing everything right but things can happen beyond your control in business.”

She made the decision to shelve her business and left Dublin, having sold the lease on her Temple Bar shop. As a lover of water sports and sailing, Tarifa was on her radar and she headed out to Spain.

“Sometimes in business, it can be difficult to remain stimulated,” she says. “A focus on the bottom line can lead to a dip in creativity. The business gets serious and it becomes about making things that you know will sell. I didn’t want to be like that.”

For winter 2009, she designed a jewellery collection whilst in Tarifa. “The difference between this and previous collections was that I didn’t care whether it sold or not. It was a very creative process and, of course, the collection went really well.”

There followed a period in which she obtained her kite surfing instructor’s certification and began teaching kite surfing, continuing right up until the birth of her son, Luca, who is now three years old.

Having “fallen out of love with jewellery” because of her recession experience, she is now reinvigorated and is taking on the business with gusto again. She came home at Christmas last year to showcase her designs at the Design and Craft Fair in Dublin’s RDS and now has a sunny studio around the corner from her home in Tarifa Old Town.

“An average day means rising early and taking my son to crèche,” says Kinnear. “Then I head to the studio where I work on design, on jewellery commissions, on my website and the online sales aspect, head to the post office, work on producing the look-books, deal with suppliers and so on.”

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Light

The main difference where she operates now is in the light on Costa de la Luz – the “Coast of Light”.

“Compared to the dark shop in Temple Bar, I’ve got plenty of light in my studio now. It’s a small shop and studio space – customers can phone me and stop by for appointments. My working life is more flexible than it was in Dublin where I had to be in the shop eight hours a day.”

While she is almost fluent in Spanish, she still attends refresher classes every year to enhance her knowledge of the language, but says the unique dialect of the region as well as the smalltown atmosphere of Tarifa were challenging in the early days.

“Everyone thinks that you’re living the dream when you move to somewhere warm but sometimes it can be a nightmare, especially if you don’t speak the language. Only this year am I in a position to have a shop and speak to people about my jewellery.

“It’s a tourist town and I previously didn’t know enough Spanish to speak confidently to a visitor from Madrid about my jewellery,” she says.

Despite the challenges, the Dundrum native says Tarifa is a wonderful place to rear her son, who speaks three languages and enjoys the outdoor lifestyle. Her parents, who are retired, stay in Tarifa for five months of the year and live nearby for the winter months.

Kinnear returns to Dublin twice a year and says she misses her friends and “the craic” in Ireland but says, for now, with a young son and a renewed interest in her jewellery business, this seaside town and kite surfer’s heaven is the place to be. www.jenniferkinnear.com

This article was first published in May 2016.
From corporate finance to Barcelona bars

Robby Dunne moved to Spain more than a decade ago and now runs three venues

Robby Dunne left life in corporate finance in Dublin for Barcelona 13 years ago and now runs three bar-restaurants in the city – La Fianna, La Luna and Dunne’s Irish Bar – with a fourth establishment due to open in a matter of months.

Despite having worked in bars during his late teens and early 20s, Dunne went on to forge a career in corporate finance for Bysis Fund Services, moving back to Dublin in 2000, where his role as financial director was a pan-European one.

In 2002, the company closed many of its offices across Europe (and was subsequently bought by Citigroup in 2007).

“I had the offer to return to the States but I didn’t really want to go back,” says Dunne. “The weather was horrific and I had some savings, so when my pal suggested I give Barcelona a go, I took a sabbatical.”

The first business Dunne opened was called La Fianna, a bar and restaurant with a distinctly laid-back atmosphere.

Ruth O’Connor

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The first business Dunne opened was called La Fianna, a bar and restaurant with a distinctly laid-back atmosphere.
“I was lucky in that it was probably the first large place within the Born area of Barcelona so it became a popular place for people to socialise.”

_Narrow streets_

The Born area of Barcelona was not the popular social destination it is now and there were few other large bars or restaurants among the narrow streets. The introduction of the smoking ban in 2008 brought further complications with neighbours as customers went outside to smoke.

“Back then, the Born Barrio of Barcelona was just becoming a cool area to hang out, so local people saw a lot of changes and weren’t happy with bars staying open till 3am,” says Dunne.

Dunne did not have a word of Spanish at the time – something of a challenge when establishing his business. “Some English guys and an American helped me to set up the business and build the premises. Phone calls were the worst. It was so difficult to get my point across or understand what people were saying,” he says.

“In those early days, not only did he need to learn Spanish but everything had to be done in Catalan as well. The people are incredibly proud of their culture – you can actually get fined for not having a menu printed in Catalan which is widely spoken,” says Dunne.

Dunne used a law company with whom he was familiar from his corporate finance days to handle the paperwork.

“A good English-speaking lawyer is essential when you’re setting up a business, particularly in terms of contractual agreements.”

In November 2007, Dunne opened his second business, La Luna, at the same time his first child was born.

“When you open a new bar or restaurant, you have to immerse yourself in it. It was tough doing that with a new baby and, to make matters worse, we did it again with the second child opening the Irish bar in September 2010!” he laughs.

The financial crisis impacted on how people want to eat.

“They no longer want to have to pay €18 for a steak when they go out. Businesses were forced to think outside the box. What happened in Ireland in 2008 and 2009 didn’t happen here until 2012 and 2013 when things were at their very worst. It took a while longer for the crash to trickle down, despite the fact that the Spanish did not over-extend themselves the way the Irish did.”

One of the greatest impacts he has seen is on the number of ex-pats in the city. “They would work hard five days a week and then they’d spend their money in the bars two days a week.”
between 2012 and 2014 it was even difficult to find experienced staff. I was getting CVs from architects and mechanics but not everyone can be a waitress or a bartender – it’s an art like anything else,” he says.

Being his own boss means Dunne gets to spend plenty of time with his wife and kids, bringing them to school in the morning and having dinner with them in the evening.

Countryside

“Living in the city suits us all. It’s near work for me, my kids Maria and Robby go to a really cool school and my wife Natalia loves living in the city. It’s only 30 minutes into the countryside so we get out often.

“If you’re moving to Barcelona and to work in hospitality you really have to live in the city to reach the masses of tourists who come here.”

Dunne says he is happier and more financially comfortable than he might be had he stayed in corporate finance, and taking a punt on the size of his premises has paid off.

“I am definitely happier here doing this than I would have been had I stayed in my career in finance,” he says. “A number of friends also left similar roles to come here and opened up businesses and we all just think we are the luckiest guys on the planet . . . We work hard, we have to work hard, but it’s nice being your own boss and making your way.”

lafianna.com

lalunabcn.com

dunnesirishbar.com

This article was first published in May 2016.
Patrick Kirby on adjusting to life in New York

*After a tough start, the Cork-born marketing graduate is progressing in the Big Apple*

*Fiona Alston*

Patrick Kirby is doing well for himself. But the young Cork man based in New York City says it has a lot less to do with luck and a lot more to do with just making it happen.

And with a leadership role in a Fifth Avenue office, this marketing student has certainly made good across the Atlantic.

From the small village of Caheragh, Kirby is no stranger to business. His parents own an oil distribution company as well as a pub, a shop and a farm. Kirby studied marketing in NUI Galway, graduating in 2013.

Looking at post-grad options, Kirby chose Cairns School of Business in Galway where, he recalls, “the unique thing about it was we were on a full-time work placement”.

Kirby secured work with the ESB for his Masters in Marketing Practice, a placement which, alongside his coursework, he thinks was beneficial to his new life in the US.
“The academic side was very time consuming but great training for coming to New York. I had a lot of long days, a full-time job and studying on top of it. It was demanding.”

Unique position

“I went into ESB innovation in head office in Dublin. I was in a very unique position. I was in an internship but I was getting to deal with a lot of directors. I was in the electric vehicle section, working very closely with the marketing manager. For someone so young to be exposed to directors and a lot of decision makers, it was a great place to be and a great company to work for.”

Having secured a first class honours masters, Kirby accepted a new contract with the ESB, though he knew he was unlikely to see it out. America was calling and he just needed the push to get him there.

In September 2014, he heard that the USIT Graduate visa had nearly filled its quota. It was the end of a five-year pilot programme and Kirby knew the chance might not come around again. By mid-December he was heading home to spend a couple of weeks with his family before heading across the Atlantic.

“I came out here on December 31st, 2014. It was New Year, new me, New York.”

Jobless arriving in the city, Kirby started casting his net wide, applying for jobs. And it wasn’t just looking for work that was hard.

“I arrived in a very harsh topography. It was the worst winter in New York in 20 years. The snow is different here in the US. It snows and it lodges.

“I dealt with a lot of adversity here at the start,” he says. “A lot of it was personal. It was a lot more traumatic moving to a new country than I thought it would be. I struggled a lot and, even to this day, I’m not even fully settled in in New York. I’m a proud Irish man, I’ll never fully settle in.”

Two months after his arrival Kirby was hired by a start-up company GlassView which deals in video advertising. By the end of his first week as a digital operations executive, the company offered to sponsor a visa for him.

“There were plenty of people who could do my job and who didn’t require a visa to work in the US. It was a big statement of intent on their part,” he says.

“It was 12 or 13 weeks into my current visa and I was already having to think about my next move. I think that was a bit of bigger picture thinking very early on.”
The move has worked out well for Kirby, who is now the manager of accounts and global team lead with GlassView but he believes that to survive in business in New York, you need a lot more than luck.

“What I would say to people is to come out, look for areas where you can go, look for good mentors. Get the skills and the expertise, then the money will follow. People seem to think they should look to where the money is. If you’re passionate about doing it, things are going to happen for you. If you have an attitude of aptitude, it’s an easy recipe for success.”

**Long hours**

Being prepared to work long hours, having a social calendar full of networking opportunities and neutralising his accent is just some of the advice Patrick has for millennials thinking of moving to the Big Apple.

Another thing that is different from working at home is New York tax.

“New York tax is pretty crazy. Definitely, if you are earning a substantial fee or salary, I would say to get some advice, professional advice. Don’t think you can do it all. Bring in your lawyer, your attorney or your accountant.”

*This article was first published in April 2016.*
Dispelling myths about life in UAE

Stephen McKenna, senior associate, Clyde & Co, United Arab Emirates

Charlie Taylor

A chance to work as legal counsel for one of Ireland’s leading construction firms first brought Stephen McKenna to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The opportunity to join the largest law firm in the Middle East persuaded him to stay and live a lifestyle he could only dream of at home.

McKenna is a senior associate with Clyde & Co, a global law firm with 1,800 lawyers and annual revenues of about £395 million (€500 million). He has been living in the UAE since 2009 and currently splits his time equally between Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

Having spent over six years in the region and some time before that living in the United States, Germany and Saudi Arabia, McKenna is used to being away from Ireland. But there is still plenty the Malahide man misses about home, including family, friends and proper chipper chips.

Nonetheless, he has happily embraced his adopted homeland and likes nothing more than to dispel myths about the place to those who may have what he sees as outdated and ill-informed ideas about the region.
“It is generally a very misunderstood place. People often ask me how I could live out here, can you get a drink and so on but I’ve found it to be a very welcoming place where you can pretty much live your life as you’d wish to do,” said McKenna, who lives on Reem Island in Abu Dhabi.

“A lot of outsiders don’t understand that it is a very tolerant place. About 85 per cent of the people living here are ex-pats and I’m not sure if there’s any country in Europe that would put up with a situation in which just 15 per cent are locals.

“Of course, as Westerners, we have a very different belief system and cultural norms, but yet I’ve found people here to be very open and accepting of foreigners,” he added.

McKenna, who is back in Ireland next week to speak at the 2016 Arab-Irish Business Forum at Dublin Castle on Friday, has experience advising clients on a wide range of matters. These include mergers and acquisitions, joint ventures, commercial contracts, private equity, company law, corporate governance, tax-based investment fund subscriptions, asset purchases, restructuring and project finance.

He began his career working for Eversheds in Dublin, where he stayed for almost six years. During his time with the law firm, McKenna worked on a contract with the construction firm, the Sammon Group, which has interests in the Middle East.

“I was based in Ireland but was doing a lot of travel to the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Libya. When I finished up that role, I got a call out of the blue from the company’s chief executive who was based in Abu Dhabi and he said they were looking at restructuring their legal department and would I be interested in coming out here as their legal counsel.

“It was one of those opportunities you can spend a lifetime looking for and never get, so I decided to take it,” he said.

“I did that for just under two years and then decided to go back into private practice rather than stay in-house about four years ago. I ended up at Clyde & Co and I’ve been there ever since,” McKenna added.

Given his day job, McKenna has encountered many Irish and other European companies that have tried to expand into the Middle East and North Africa. Not all of them have enjoyed success.

“How business is conducted here is different from in Europe and not everyone is sensitive to the differences. People coming here can tend to underestimate the importance of relationships, which tend to be built over time and are very much built on trust,” he said.

“As Europeans, we can be very black and white when it comes to doing business. There can be a tendency to be quite aggressive when negotiating but, if you go in hard and heavy, it
can lead to a complete shutdown whereas approaching things in a more collaborative fashion is often much more rewarding for everyone,” McKenna added.

He’s keen to praise the success of Irish companies that have enjoyed success in the Gulf region, namechecking the likes of Kingspan, which has a large presence locally, and Aer Rianta, which recently won a 10-year contract to operate the duty free in the new Midfield terminal building in Abu Dhabi International Airport.

While the local economy has experienced ups and downs in recent years and is beginning to experience the impact of lower oil prices, McKenna believes there are still plenty of opportunities for Irish companies in the Middle East.

“It isn’t boomtime right now and the effect of falling oil prices is definitely being felt, particularly in Abu Dhabi. But I’d say the overall feeling is one of reserved positivity and there is still interest from foreign companies,” he said.

As for himself, McKenna has no doubt that future opportunities exist for him to further his career in the region. After more than six years living in Abu Dhabi, he’s in the process of buying an apartment and sees his immediate future as being in the Middle East.

“The intention, at least in the medium term, is to remain out here. I miss plenty about home but the sunshine and the fact that I don’t have to pay tax means I get to live the kind of lifestyle that most people only dream of,” he said.

This article was first published in April 2016.
In 1999, Clodagh Boyle graduated in communications studies from DCU and went to Boston for a six-month internship with the American Ireland Fund. Five years later she left the organisation, having risen through the ranks to become director of communications.

Boyle returned to Ireland at the height of the Celtic Tiger in 2004 and began working in the marketing communications department of Bank of Ireland.

“I came home at this time mainly because I felt it was time for a change and I wanted to broaden my experience,” she says. “But I was also curious about Ireland in the boom. Dublin seemed to have become such a vibrant place and I was attracted by the buzz.”

Two years later, affairs of the heart drew Boyle back to the US. She returned to Boston to be with her Irish-American boyfriend Andy (whose grandfather was from Ballyporeen) and to join the marketing department of corporate law firm Foley Hoag. The couple later married and now have two children, Sadhbh (5) and Marc (3).
“It was easier for me to move back to the US as I already had a business network and a circle of friends and was offered a good position with Foley Hoag from Dublin,” Boyle says. “A lot of my graduating class went abroad to work and, for me, moving away was about the experience and adventure of living abroad rather than the need to find a job.

“I had always been interested in experiencing life in the US and there is certainly a level of ease and convenience to living in a US city that I’ve become used to from having 24-hour supermarkets to same-day delivery and pretty much everything online.

“I also love where we live and the fact that the geography and weather allow beach visits in the summer, while skiing and winter getaways are only a drive away. The flipside is finding the time to take the trips. Americans struggle with work-life balance and always being ‘switched on’.”

In 2012 Boyle moved from Foley Hoag to join litigation firm Manion Gaynor & Manning as director of marketing. Three years later she moved to InkHouse Media & Marketing as vice-president for marketing. The agency, which was set up in 2007, has 100 staff in offices in Boston and San Francisco.

“With the decline in traditional advertising, PR, social media and content have become the primary tools to get consumer attention and persuade buyers to choose one brand over another,” Boyle says. “We work with early-stage companies and Fortune 100 enterprises to increase their marketing effectiveness and drive brand growth. The digital channel is changing the very nature of business as well as marketing and communications.”

Working for an agency gives Boyle the kind of diversity she thrives on. “I love learning about new businesses and their competitive landscapes, their needs and pain points and figuring out where we can improve and innovate. I direct all InkHouse inbound and outbound marketing activities with an emphasis on new business activity. Essentially, marketing the marketers,” she says.

Boyle believes the differences that used to exist between how US and Irish companies do business are narrowing.

“This is the mobile age and the ‘always-on’ entrepreneurial style now exists in both places. This lends itself to the vibrant, tech start-up culture that is growing both here and in Dublin,” she says.
“However, I see a noticeable change in corporate culture here in the US due in no small part to the rise of tech behemoths like Google and Facebook. Work-life balance and perks such as onsite childcare have now become really important when attracting and retaining staff.

“I’m fortunate to work in a company with a CEO who champions work-life balance. So we have a ‘no email’ rule between 7pm and 7am which means you can have a family life. We also get parental leave and unlimited vacation time in order to recharge our batteries. In turn, staff turnover is low, communication is strong and productivity is high.”

Knowledge economy

Boyle identifies the main job opportunities for Irish people in the US as being in software as a service (SaaS), IT, biopharma and cloud computing.

“These sectors are all growing fast with corresponding employment possibilities,” she says. “The knowledge economy means that the bar is now higher for everyone but I think Ireland has an edge due to its highly educated workforce.

“I’m a big believer in having a strong network and good connections to assist your career. Of course, it’s a lot easier to do this now as you can use the power of social channels to maintain your global network.”

Boyle is still in contact with the American Ireland Fund and is involved with its Young Leaders programme.

“I was given my first job opportunity by Irish-Americans so I strive to be active in the Irish business community in Boston, while keeping my finger on the pulse at home,” she says.

“By being here I continued to grow professionally during the recession which would probably not have happened had I been in Dublin. The downturn was much less severe and austere on the east coast of the US and I’m grateful for that.”

This article was first published in April 2016.
Marketing the future of the internet of things

Kieran Hannon, Belkin, Los Angeles

From running his own highly successful advertising firm in San Francisco to looking after global marketing for a billion-dollar tech firm based in LA, Kieran Hannon knows a lot about how best to promote big brands.

The Sutton-born man, who has been named as one of the top 100 chief marketing officers in the world, and one of the most influential ones on Twitter, says that while he initially studied engineering at college, his heart was always in reaching out to customers.

Hannon, who has been living and working on the west coast of the United States for the past 30 years, is currently employed as chief marketing officer for Belkin International, looking after its three core brands: Belkin, Linksys and WeMo.

Belkin, recently named by Fast Company as one of the most innovative companies in the Internet of Things (IoT) space, is best known as a manufacturer of consumer electronics. In recent years, however, it has diversified greatly, first through its acquisition of the data networking hardware products firm Linksys in early 2013, and then through WeMo, a
branded suite of home automation gadgets that enable users to control electronics remotely.

Hannon says that, from a young age, he wanted to go into marketing, but was initially persuaded against it.

“In my heart of hearts, I really wanted to be in marketing from the start, but my dad wanted me to take over the family business. He and his brother had a very successful company and wanted me to join it so I ended up doing engineering at college with a view to doing exactly that. But it was never really my thing.” He says doing promotional work for Rothmans and related brands served him well as he moved to the US shortly after graduating and decided to go into advertising.

“I started working in ad agencies in San Francisco, including the likes of Young and Rubicam, J Walter Thompson and Saatchi & Saatchi, and over the years slowly worked my way up to the point where I was running my own agency, heading up the Grey Group operations in the Bay Area.

“From there I decided to go client side, firstly working as vice-president of marketing for Radioshack and then spending a few years working for a bunch of start-ups such as Helio, Cooking.com, Sidebar and UBM Cannon, before ending up at Belkin in May 2013, just two months after the company had acquired Linksys,” he says.

While transitioning from one side of the fence to the other might put off some, Hannon has enjoyed the change.

“Back when I was in the agency world and was running global accounts successfully, I really enjoyed all the creativity that went with all of that. Of course, that was something of a heyday when agencies really managed brands for their clients. Fast-forward to today and with the many different ways in which consumers can engage with the brand, marketers really need to control the destiny and help nurture brands themselves because everything moves so fast,” he says.

Hannon says he loves the way social media has helped bring marketers closer to customers in recent years.

“I really enjoy that I can have real-time conversations with consumers. I’m very active on Twitter in particular and like engaging with people to try to understand what they are doing. We get great feedback using social media and for a marketer it is a heaven-sent tool,” he says.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Hannon is also very excited about the products he’s charged with promoting. “It’s really exciting to be working with these brands, all of which are having a
major impact in homes across the globe. The brands are all distinct but related and they are at the centre of any smart home,” he says.

Given that a lot of the products he is promoting are in the IoT space, he says that a certain amount of his advertising spend is as much about educating consumers as selling to them.

“Helping people understand how these devices can help them manage their lives and earthly assets better is important and people get it immediately when you explain the benefits. Like we have smart water meters that let users know if there’s a leak or the possibility of a pipe bursting. Once people hear that technology like that is easily available, they are keen to invest in it,” he says.

Though having spent most of his working life in the US, Hannon has kept his links with home. In addition to being a technology advisory board member for Enterprise Ireland, he’s also a founding member of the Irish Technology Leadership Group.

Hannon says he was impressed with the calibre of the Irish companies coming to Silicon Valley, highlighting the likes of individuals such as Liam Casey of PCH and Pat Phelan of Trustev. “I see a lot of Pat Phelans in Ireland,” he says, urging entrepreneurs to act now, rather than later.

“If you’ve ambitions and really want to achieve those, then there’s really nothing wrong in travelling away to do it. We’ve got to get past that notion in Ireland that if you leave to do something elsewhere, then there’s something wrong. People travel all the time now and they go away and then come back and bring that energy and expertise back with them. That can only be seen as a good thing.”

*This article was first published in April 2016.*
Confidence and a winning attitude in dynamic Dutch city

Eva Heffernan says Amsterdam in the Netherlands was an obvious choice to move to with family living nearby in the city and in Antwerp.

Ruth O'Connor

Eva Heffernan says Amsterdam is a dynamic and family-friendly place to work and to raise a family. The Glasnevin native is director for sales strategy and operations for cloud-computing firm Salesforce. She is responsible for northern European markets including the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Finland and Sweden. She works with the senior sales leadership to develop and execute go-to-market strategies.

Heffernan studied for her BA including German at University College Dublin, during which time she completed an Erasmus year at the University of Kassel in Germany. From there she went to Universität Wien (Vienna) under a scholarship provided by the Austrian government. Then she studied business coaching at Coach Institute of Ireland and got a subsequent diploma in psychotherapy at Dublin Business School.

Heffernan built a career in the tech sector in Dublin, working at Siemens, Oracle and Microsoft (where she was on the Top Talent programme) before moving to Salesforce in Amsterdam in March 2014. Heffernan credits her parents for instilling in her a positive, can-
do attitude, something that she and her husband William are now trying to pass on to their two daughters.

“My parents taught us that we are winners and gave us the confidence to be successful both at home and abroad,” Heffernan says. “I try to give that message to my kids. I am so proud of the way they have adapted to their new life. In fact, my youngest has better Dutch than English and that stings a bit.”

After the birth of her second child, she reassessed her work to make “deliberate choices about the next stage” of her life. “I worked with an executive coach at Clearbird and started to capture what excited me in my working day and what experiences I wanted more of,” she says. “At the same time, my husband and I started to consider the possibility of moving countries. He was travelling a lot with work and we wanted to look at a more central location in Europe.”

Amsterdam was an obvious choice for them as Heffernan has two sisters living there and her husband’s family is a couple of hours away in Antwerp. He secured an internal move at the time with Accenture and Heffernan used her network to secure what she describes as her “dream job” with Salesforce.

“Salesforce is a fast-growing, customer-focused company, so it is a very positive and focused environment,” she says.

While she misses home, and close family in particular, she visits often – travelling back to Dublin to the Salesforce hub in Sandyford.

“It is great to see so many sales people kick off their careers in Dublin and transform their careers to become top performers in the region,” says Heffernan, who has won various accolades throughout her career. She now leads the Salesforce women’s network for the region.

“Part of the challenge facing Salesforce, and other tech companies, is having access to an adequate pool of diverse tech talent. To help keep the pipeline filled, the company supports organisations that strive to promote technology education and careers, such as CoderDojo,” she says. “We have a big focus on inspiring young women into Stem studies and work with organisations such as the Stemettes to help give young women insight into the industry.” Heffernan is also a member of GirlsinTech.

For her, having her sisters Vivienne and Mary just a cycle away has aided settling in to the city. They meet often as well for occasions such as Easter and the Six Nations rugby events.

The family’s first year was spent settling the children into crèche and school but they have begun to branch out more, developing friendships and travelling by car for holidays in Europe. Despite childcare and rents being expensive in the city, Heffernan says it is balanced
out by the excellent healthcare (for which they pay a monthly premium that is wage-dependant), a strong jobs market, a good attitude to those in the workplace with families and plenty of family-friendly amenities.

“The hardest part of leaving Ireland was saying goodbye to family and this was the first big decision I made for my little nuclear family,” she says. “My little girls won’t grow up day by day with their cousins, but when we are out cycling as a family in Amsterdam, I see we are giving them a great gift, too.”

This article was first published in January 2016.
Poitín maker in high spirits over London launch

Dave Mulligan, London, had run the popular speakeasy-style pub Shebeen for three years

Ruth O’Connor

Dave Mulligan has been living in London for the past four years. Having run the popular speakeasy-style pub Shebeen for three years, he and his business partner Cara Humphreys launched Bán Poitín – a new brand of poitín which is stocked in numerous high-end bars and retailers in the capital – eight weeks ago.

Launching a new brand poitín means Mulligan’s working days are long and time off is rare. When we meet in the Marker Hotel in Dublin, he has just had his first day off in seven weeks. Mulligan’s daily routine involves hitting the emails by 8.30am – liaising with the bars, restaurants and shops currently stocking the brand and lining up meetings with potential stockists in London, Dublin and Belfast.

The bars of Belfast are an emerging market for the brand given the city’s proximity to the source of Bán Poitín – the Echlinville distillery in the Ards Peninsula which is a partner in the brand. Working with Echlinville has involved plenty of to-ing and fro-ing between London and Northern Ireland in order to work on product development and to bring the product to market.
After electronic housekeeping, it’s onto the bike for Mulligan and off around London with bottles of poitín in his Stighlorgan backpack. He meets the city’s best bartenders and mixologists – promoting the brand, providing one-on-one sessions with customers and occasionally hopping behind the bar himself as guest bartender – all in an effort to promote the brand, reveal the back story of poitín and show the professionals how to incorporate it into their bar menus.

“We are a small emerging brand,” says Mulligan. “So we don’t have a huge amount of stock to throw at people. That means it’s a case of building relationships, meeting people in person and wearing out shoe leather. We don’t have deep pockets but we do have time.”

Admittedly the line between business and pleasure can seem blurred as Mulligan is often expected to work late and to be seen to be interested in his product. “Of course you must remain professional but in this industry you also have to be seen to be drinking your product.”

_Misguided_

In the past few months Mulligan’s brand (which is made with malted barley, potatoes and sugar beet) has found a home in some of the city’s most exclusive drinking houses – the Blind Pig, the Sun Tavern, Callooh Callay, the London Cocktail Club and Selfridges are among those with an interest in this new commercial product with an underground edgy (though, in Mulligan’s opinion, often misguided) history.

Having worked in the bar scene in Ireland, New York and France, Mulligan says he landed on his feet in London: “I met an older Irish couple who wanted to open a speakeasy bar. It was a classy lounge but offered a wide range of Irish whiskeys.” He and business partner Cara Humphreys (who comes from a marketing background) began to investigate the idea of poitín, its history and its potential.

The time was right, says Mulligan, for the launching of the product. The cocktail scene and the craft beer market has exploded in the past few years and he sees the advent of new spirit and whiskey brands as a natural development of the market.

“If you look at the craft beer scene, people have started caring about what beer they’re drinking and where it comes from and spirits are the next step. It’s already happening in London where the scene is exploding. In London too, you are really talking about the top of the food chain in terms of the skills and level of expertise bartenders and cocktail makers have.

“The Irish Whiskey Industry estimates that there will be 35 new distilleries opened in Ireland by 2019,” says Mulligan. “We see poitín as the most interesting thing you could make in Ireland.
**Rogue element**

“In Ireland the drink has something of a muddied reputation, but in London people love the rogue element, the illegal history of the drink, and are embracing it as something new on the scene.”

He believes that the city has been a great place in which to launch and credits the openness of many of those working in the drinks industry there, including Willy Burrell owner of Vestal Vodka and Mark Ward of Regal Rogu, both of whom have provided him with plenty of advice. He also credits Humphreys as “one of the best finds since moving to London” and is keen to emphasise how vital she is to the brand in a business often associated with men.

“Irish whiskey is getting more popular now thanks to the cocktail scene there which is definitely the best in the world. There are new bars opening all the time and we are lucky that we have a huge network of support in the drinks industry with people who are a couple of years ahead of us or a year behind us with new product. We offer each other a lot of support.”

**Creative**

Living in Highbury, Mulligan finds the accessibility of the city an advantage as well as its buzzy, creative atmosphere. While he has yet to join any networks there, he finds that online communities and social media can be just as valuable in terms of networking and building his brand. He cites the London Arts and Creative Industries forum on Facebook as one of particular benefit to him in terms of making contacts.

Mulligan has a tight network of friends and associates in London, many of whom are Irish. He believes that there is no longer a distinction between Irish creatives and those of any other nationality in the city.

Speaking of himself and other Irish business owners in London, he says: “We hate pushing the Tricolour and the shamrock. We don’t think it’s cool; it’s not how you build a brand these days. There are many other people in London who share our values. There are lots of creative Irish people working in London but we don’t need to push the leprechaun thing.”

“Years ago it was Stoke Newington, Camden Town and Kilburn – all the Irish people flocked to those places and stuck together. It’s not about Irish ghettos any more. We are intertwined in London culture . . . We all know we are Irish and we look after each other but it doesn’t benefit our businesses by ramming the Irish thing down people’s throats.” banpoitin.com

*This article was first published in October 2015.*
Sense of adventure leads to Welsh venture

*Eoghan Powell, co-founder, Carreg Adventure, Swansea, Wales*

_Eoghan Powell_ says he always knew he would never be satisfied working for someone else, but had no idea of the weight of responsibility he would feel once he left Ireland to set up his business Carreg Adventure with his wife Ceri.

“The lack of a safety net is massive,” Powell says. “It’s one of the more scary aspects, but we just felt it was now or never.”

Since March this year, the couple have been running Carreg Adventure in Swansea as an outdoor adventure centre during the week and as an alternative wedding venue at weekends.

Originally from Portmarnock in Dublin, Powell says he felt the need to move to Wales to set up his business for a number of reasons.

**Kirstin Campbell**

Eoghan Powell says he always knew he would never be satisfied working for someone else, but had no idea of the weight of responsibility he would feel once he left Ireland to set up his business Carreg Adventure with his wife Ceri.

“The lack of a safety net is massive,” Powell says. “It’s one of the more scary aspects, but we just felt it was now or never.”

Since March this year, the couple have been running Carreg Adventure in Swansea as an outdoor adventure centre during the week and as an alternative wedding venue at weekends.

Originally from Portmarnock in Dublin, Powell says he felt the need to move to Wales to set up his business for a number of reasons.
“In Britain, the outdoor industry is so much bigger and more established than here,” he says. “Things were right at the bottom in Ireland, so it made as much sense as anything to give it a shot.”

He grew up in the industry, as his uncle set up the Delphi Adventure Resort in Galway in the 1980s. “I’ve always been surrounded by it and always wanted to get involved with it, but at the same time I kind of knew that, realistically, there are very few careers in it,” Powell says.

He says that one of the main reasons he felt he couldn’t set up a business in Ireland is due to the size of the market, as his uncle is still involved in the industry. “I worked for him for a while and learned a lot from him, but at the same time I couldn’t set up in competition to him,” he says.

“I went off and I tried to get a couple of real jobs. I worked in advertising for a while, I did various sales jobs, but I wasn’t really passionate about any of those things”.

After spending a year travelling in Africa, Powell came back to work in the outdoor industry as an instructor and then in management and training and development in the west of Ireland, France, South Africa and Britain.

“I always felt I was going to have to go abroad if I was going to do something specifically in this industry,” he says.

Different scale

Powell says the outdoor industry in Britain is on an entirely different scale than anywhere else, including Ireland and even the United States.

“The biggest adventure centres in Ireland would have one reasonably sized centre, whereas the biggest company in England has 15 ginormous centres,” he says. “And they’re now playing on a worldwide scale.”

He says that although Carreg is not interested in “global domination scale” at the moment, they hope to expand to two or three adventure centres in Wales in the next 15 or 20 years.

Powell stumbled on an advertisement for the lease of the 18th century mansion at Stouthall in 2012, after moving from Ireland in 2009.

“We came in and pretty much immediately fell in love with the place,” he says, adding that they spent the next three years raising money, putting a business plan together and negotiating with three sets of councils and two landlords.

“It was a very complicated process to pull it all together,” he says.
The couple took possession of the Georgian mansion in November and spent the winter gutting and restoring the property.

“We haven’t had a day off since last November or more than six hours’ sleep a night,” Powell says.

He says he hasn’t made this little money since he worked in a bar as a teenager.

“Eventually, hopefully, the payoff will reflect that. But we’re not doing this because we’re expecting to get a yacht in the south of France, we’re doing it because you feel like you have to,” he says.

As well as being an adventure centre and wedding venue, Carreg Adventure also holds pop-up restaurant nights and afternoon teas, and Powell says they are looking into running other events such as murder mystery and zombie nights and Halloween and Christmas parties.

Powell and his Welsh wife Ceri were married in March this year at Stouthall and decided while planning their wedding to explore other ways the house could be used.

“As we started to put it together, we started to think that maybe what we’re looking for in a wedding, there’s probably other people who are interested in that as well, something that’s a bit more relaxed, a weekend-long thing, more like a festival as opposed to a big party in a hotel function room,” he says.

He believes going abroad is necessary if you want to set up a business on a global scale. “You can probably do some of that from Ireland but I think if you’re going to compete on those levels, you need to go to those places,” he says.

Powell believes “the harder you work, the luckier you get”, adding that he and his wife were turned down for four sets of grants before they were successful.

“I think that’s what you’ve got to do, is just to keep plugging away at it,” he says. “Essentially keep rolling the dice until the right numbers come up.” carregadventure.co.uk/

This article was first published in October 2015.
‘My biggest opportunity is about experiencing the wider world’

For computer science graduate Dave Cahill, even after three years the shine hasn’t worn off and Tokyo is still ‘the best city in the world’

Olive Keogh

In 2014, computer science graduate Dave Cahill joined the newly opened Tokyo office of online recruitment search site Indeed. One of his early roles as senior software engineer was training in the new recruits for his department as the company grew from eight to more than 100 engineers in just over a year.

Shepherding newcomers still forms part of his job, but his key responsibilities now focus on troubleshooting and building new features for the site.

Indeed is based in the heart of Tokyo on the 32nd floor of the Ebisu Garden Place Tower with views of Tokyo Tower and Mount Fuji, and Cahill just loves living there.

“Even after three years, the shine hasn’t worn off. I still think it’s the best city in the world,” he says. “People are extremely kind and thoughtful and everything works very smoothly. Public transport is punctual and easy to use and service in shops and restaurants is impeccable.”
“There are four very distinct seasons, with a summer that is always reliably warm – which is very nice after Ireland’s unpredictable summer weather. I also love the language and studied fairly hard to get the highest level of Japanese language certification.”

When the Cahills moved to Japan first, they lived in a typically tiny Tokyo apartment. However, with the arrival of baby Eva 18 months ago, Cahill and his wife Charlotte, a freelance graphic designer, moved to get more space.

“We’re still very close to the centre and can be there in a matter of minutes, but we now live in a quiet residential area with a Western-style apartment and it’s really nice,” Cahill says.

Cahill originally moved to Japan in 2012 to work with virtual networking start-up Midokura. He had previously worked with Accenture in Dublin before moving to rural Japan for a year to teach English as part of the Japan exchange and teaching programme. Cahill and his wife loved Japan and, when their year was up, they came back to Ireland but always dreamed of returning.

**Online services**

Between 2008 and 2012, Cahill worked for Demonware in Dublin as a software manager building online services for well-known games such as Call of Duty and Guitar Hero.

“Since I joined Indeed in April 2014, we have grown at a very fast pace and Indeed now has sites in more than 50 countries and 28 languages,” he says.

“My work is varied and involves developing and optimising the company pages section of the site – which gives jobseekers information about companies and what it’s like to work there – and I’m currently also working on improving and maintaining the systems that support sponsored jobs.

“This allows employers to promote their jobs in much the same way as companies advertise their sites on Google.”

Indeed works through English so Cahill says the culture shock has been minimal in that respect. What has surprised him, however, are some of the other practices that are acceptable in Japan.

“Falling asleep at work is considered fine because people in some companies work very long hours and need to catch up on sleep,” he says.

“Even falling asleep during meetings is okay but, for someone used to the Irish or American way of working, it’s quite a shock when a member of your client’s team falls asleep when you’re presenting to them.”
Cahill has adapted well to living and working in Japan, not least because he put a huge effort into perfecting his language skills.

“There are several levels of politeness and the highest level of politeness (which is the norm for dealing with clients) is quite difficult for foreigners to grasp,” he says.

“I enjoy the language and, when I moved to Tokyo in 2012, I wanted to challenge myself to get better quickly. So when an opportunity came up to present to about 100 Japanese engineers in Japanese at a tech community meet-up, I decided to throw my hat into the ring and volunteer for the job.

“People were pretty surprised but I went through with it and all went well. That said, it is probably one of the scariest things I’ve ever done in my life.”

Cahill particularly likes the ethos at Indeed, which is owned by the giant Japanese HR group, Recruit.

“In software engineering specifically, the norm in Japan is for engineers to move fairly quickly into management, leading to a lack of engineers with long experience,” he says.

“It has been quite inspiring to see how Indeed is so passionate about changing this culture and providing a place where great software engineers can continue to work on software and improve their skills.”

Irish opportunities

Many would assume that Japan would offer big opportunities for those with a tech background. However, Cahill is quick to point out that opportunities in Ireland’s tech sector are also very good.

“I loved working for Demonware and there are many other very exciting tech companies in Ireland at the moment, including Indeed. Given that, I think the biggest opportunity I’m getting by working abroad is really about experiencing the wider world.

“There are definitely companies in Japan where you can work through English and have a similar atmosphere to Ireland,” Cahill adds, “but the vast majority will be very different, with a fairly strict hierarchy and will require a high level of competency in Japanese.

“It’s a fascinating country if you’re willing to spend a lot of time learning the language, but I’m not convinced it offers significantly better work experience than Ireland.”

This article was first published in January 2016.
Gráinne Ní Aodha

The expansion of the tech industry has been a double-edged sword for Gar Coen. After spending his school holidays working with Goodbody, he realised he wanted to be a stockbroker, and went to study in the UK. Once he finished his degree, he went to work at Merrill Lynch, and realised that the job he liked didn’t exist anymore.

The big blackboard where the share prices were updated was gone, and the physical exchange now happened through digitally created means. This led him to further his education. His grá for the United States and the experience of seeing how it worked for friends and relatives before him, led him to San Francisco, where he completed an MBA, majoring in entrepreneurship.

In 2008, Coen was doing consultancy work for start-ups when IDA Ireland announced it was opening a new office in southern California. Despite being the outsider, he got the job, which gave him the chance to promote Ireland and help American companies through the process of setting up their European offices there.

“I was never going to play soccer for Ireland. But if I could do business for Ireland, I could take pride in that.”
After working with huge companies such as Riot Games, Ancestry.com and Overstock.com, Coen left the IDA.

“Six years is generally the longest the IDA will have someone in an overseas office. I was offered a job with them back in Dublin, but I’d been in California for 10 years at that point. My wife was from California, we were expecting our first child – my whole life was in California. So I finished up in August 2014.”

He chose a job with Eversheds, Ireland’s only pan-European law firm, based on his knowledge of what US companies look for when growing internationally.

He’s a fan of Google’s “20 per cent time” initiative, which allows employees to allocate one day a week to a personal project. So, with the permission of Eversheds, “YonderGift.com became my one-day-a-week project”.

“It came from a real problem buying gifts for friends back home when you live abroad. It involves long queues at the post office, filling out custom forms, and sending a gift way in advance in the hope that it will reach your family in time – or at all.

“I kept thinking, there has to be an easier way of doing this. Every year I cursed myself for not doing something about it, thinking that someone else was bound to do it – but no one did. So when Eversheds gave me the opportunity, I thought ‘Right, let’s try and fix this.’”

YonderGift.com was then set up. It partners with independent local Irish businesses such as An Bhialann and the Fota Island Resort, allowing people anywhere in the world to buy from them.

They have a range of greeting cards that customers can choose from and use to write a personal note. The gift is packaged by hand from their office in Kilkenny, and shipped out to the recipient the next day.

“It’s a win-win for everyone – the expat abroad can buy a gift for their loved ones without the hassle; the local business receives support through extra income they wouldn’t normally have, and the family member gets a meaningful gift from their expat abroad.”

There were challenges at the beginning of the business, as Coen grappled with VAT around gift vouchers and cross-border rules, and how to pay the merchants directly once they had received payment. This latter problem was solved by partnering with payments company Stripe, based in Silicon Valley but founded by Limerick brothers John and Patrick Collison, allowing the company to begin taking orders in the past few months.
“We’ve had a kind of Christmas awakening, and we’re getting quite a lot of traffic as people bookmark things and make a note of coming back to it later. Irish people have this habit of thinking that they’re quite organised, and then rushing to buy things at the last minute!”

**Benefit of working abroad**

Coen believes that studying or working abroad is very important to broaden your perspective and vital to understand things in context.

“The difference between fast-evolving California and local Irish businesses is also remarkable: “Here, what you did yesterday is considered the old way of doing things. In Ireland, what I found when I was explaining YonderGift.com to local businesses, and telling them that they would have to digitalise a bit to make it work, they’d take out the black book with a list of all their gift voucher sales, with prices, names and dates and say ‘But this is how we’ve always done it’. Which is so beautiful in its simplicity, but also full of opportunities to evolve the Irish market.”

**This article was first published in December 2015.**
Emma McIlroy: ‘I remember holding the letter of resignation in floods of tears’

Emma McIlroy CEO of Wildfang, Oregon

Emma McIlroy has never been averse to challenge. The Northern Irish native and CEO of Wildfang, a clothing and lifestyle brand based in Oregon, is a former 800m runner for the Irish team and played hockey for Ireland.

She left a six-figure salary at Nike to set up Wildfang with her colleague Julia Parsley out of a desire to bring a distinct “tomboyish”, “badass” aesthetic to female consumers. And when she’s not heading her business or coaching young women running, she’s writing children’s books including Emma’s a Gem – a book about a problem-solving little tomboy.

Wildfang is a two-year-old, multimillion dollar, American clothing and lifestyle brand based in Portland that boasts a unique tomboy style, a growing celebrity fan base, two bricks-and-mortar stores, 17 employees and a growing consumer reach online. Self-funded to the tune of $100,000 between them, McIlroy says that her and Parsley’s investment “bought the first round of product and built the website”.

“Neither of us took a salary for the first 16 months so we lived off that for a while.”

Ruth O’Connor

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Wildfang is a two-year-old, multimillion dollar, American clothing and lifestyle brand based in Portland that boasts a unique tomboy style, a growing celebrity fan base, two bricks-and-mortar stores, 17 employees and a growing consumer reach online. Self-funded to the tune of $100,000 between them, McIlroy says that her and Parsley’s investment “bought the first round of product and built the website”.

“Neither of us took a salary for the first 16 months so we lived off that for a while.”
The two women have seen their original investors stay with them too. And those investors are no small fry either. “We have people like Tony Hsieh, the CEO of Zappos – an exceptionally successful man, Glenn Krevlin [of Glenhill Capital] a sophisticated retail investor who was chairman of the board of Design Within Reach… a lot of successful people who have made money in retail but who didn’t necessarily know how to build a brand. Given myself and Julia’s roots, there are also senior Nike people who have money in the business,” she says. McIlroy moved to the US in January 2008 to work with Nike after a year with the company in London. She had previously worked at Barclays selling business banking products before “jumping into Barclay’s Premier League Sponsorship Team” – a role which saw her “focus on a product and consumer [she] adored”. “I then met a guy who’d taken over at Nike Running who said they were looking for female marketers and next thing I knew I was in Portland, Oregon.” [Nike’s HQ is just outside the city].

Nike Running was a great fit for the Larne native who ran 800m for Ireland and played field hockey for her country from the age of about 13 to 19. “My brother James McIlroy was much better than me though. He ran 1:44.65 for 800m and 2:15 for 1000m which put him into top 10 in the world at one point. I watched him in the Olympic semi finals and Commonwealth games final – a very proud little sister,” she says.

At Nike, McIlroy worked in the role of brand manager at Nike Global Football and Running before going on to be promoted to product marketing manager, digital sport, where she worked under head of digital sport Stefan Olander before leaving to set up Wildfang. “I remember holding the letter of resignation and I was in floods of tears but the moment I let go of that letter it was a great feeling. I left a lot behind – a six-figure salary, flying around the world and so on, but building a brand is what I do best.

“I want to build something with an emotional connection, to create something that will inspire people. That’s what I did at Barclays and what I did at Nike and they’re probably the best in the world at it. That’s why there are certain companies that you care more about than others,” she tells me over Skype while her cat prowls on the sofa behind her.

A graduate of Emmanuel College, Cambridge University, McIlroy studied natural sciences, specialising in experimental psychology.

“It was an incredible degree that taught me a new way of thinking and a new way of problem solving. I spent a tonne of time thinking about behaviour and memory and how other people think and act – which is pretty important to being a marketer,” she says.

The young entrepreneur also credits her sporting background with her ability to persevere through the tough times. “A lot of my competitive drive and work ethic probably came from that. The most useful thing it taught me was to go through the hard times. You don’t feel
great at every session on the track but it leads to something bigger and knowing you can go through hell is a unique skill set,” she says.

She now regularly meets “people who haven’t quite made the leap yet” in Portland to offer advice. “I think anyone who is in the position I’m in knows they got a lot of help along the way and, if you don’t pay it back.”

Still a lover of running, she’ll train two or three times a week and helping to coach young women is a “simple idea of paying it forward”.

“I’ve had so many people who’ve looked after me from my parents to sports coaches to all the people who’ve helped us with this business giving us their nights and weekends. Building a start-up is the hardest thing I’ve ever done but it is also a privileged position because I’m doing something really exciting. I feel I have a job to give back.”

McIlroy gets home once a year for Christmas and says it’s the people she misses most about Ireland. She says that the US is a can-do place that allows people like her to do well. Hustling and self-belief are key to her success, she laughs. “We joke that when someone shuts a door Wildfang opens a window.”

All joking aside she admits: “Developing a start-up reminds me of an 800 metre race – both of them are the hardest thing you’ll ever do... and the best thing you’ll ever do.”

wildfang.com

This article was first published in November 2015.
Kildare man runs one of top new biotechs in US

Wild Geese: Nessan Bermingham, CEO, Intellia Therapeutics, Boston

Gráinne Ní Aodha

Nessan Bermingham is the only son of an Irish Army officer and a nurse and grew up on an army base in the Curragh, Co Kildare.

Now he is the head of biotech company Intellia Therapeutics, based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The company, named “one of the top new biotechs in 2014”, is developing an exciting new technology, which could act as a “search and replace” function for the body’s genetic structure, reprogramming DNA to edit out bad and/or dysfunctional genes.

Bermingham owes his initial interest in science to his primary and secondary schools – from a primary school teacher who introduced him to how the ear works, to the secondary school science teacher, who helped him enter the Young Scientist Competition at 13. This led him to study biology further.

At 20, he graduated from Queen’s University Belfast, and became a research assistant at Imperial College, London St Mary’s Hospital, which funded his PhD studies. It was then that he first looked at moving to the US where the medical research industry brought far more
possibilities: “The approach to science was totally different in Europe versus the US. In Europe we had to think about every penny. For example, we used these plastic tips to transfer liquids from one tube to another. In the UK, we had to wash these and re-stack them, while in the US you trashed them and opened a fresh box.

“In Europe there’s a limitation on resources forcing you to question and justify every experiment. In the US, money wasn’t an issue, which enables you to explore broadly.”

At 23, he moved to Houston, Texas, to work as a Howard Hughes Associate Fellow at Baylor in the Texas Medical Center. The culture shock hit him: “I brought a coat everywhere, even though the temperature rarely dropped below 90 degrees Fahrenheit and it never rained.”

On publication of his academic paper in Science, Bermingham realised he did not get a thrill from this and academia was not for him. Meanwhile, a Wall Street firm was looking at candidates in New York for its new research team, and invited Bermingham to meet with their team.

Although he didn’t know anything about Wall Street or equity research, he went as “it was a chance to go to New York on someone else’s dime”.

Despite a disagreement with the head banker, Bermingham was offered a place on the equity research team for the financial giant UBS.

“It was such a great learning environment: a calling card with UBS opened every door and the breadth of science the role covered was great. But I was writing reports, which wasn’t for me, and advising people where to invest, when I’d never even built a company before.”

Following 9/11 he decided life is short and searched for a new challenge. He got a job with Atlas Venture in London. Although it was a junior role with less money, he viewed it as an apprenticeship. He immediately loved the job, which had him constantly evaluating companies and groundbreaking scientific discoveries, and he quickly rose through the ranks becoming a partner.

In 2009, Bermingham started his own investment firm. “Probably the dumbest thing I ever did. I would wake up, read the Wall Street Journal, watch the financial markets collapse and think: ‘This is crazy’.”

Intellia Therapeutics

Last year Bermingham co-founded Intellia Therapeutics – a gene-editing company which utilises a biological tool known as the Crisps/Cas9 system. This is believed to have the potential to permanently edit diseased genes in the human body. This has the potential to cure thousands of genetically based diseases.

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“Setting up Intellia involved two years of trying to figure the sector out. There were times when it wasn’t clear if Intellia would happen, and there were many routes we could have taken. One challenge with this technology is how to get it into the cell in a human. It works when it’s in there, but what are the technologies we need to deliver it? That was particularly tricky and challenging.”

For anyone looking to emigrate, he says: “I’m all for it. You just gotta go out and explore. Networking and professional experience is so important, but so is maintaining the balance between your personal and professional life – no one teaches you about that. I turned down a lot of things because it wasn’t a fit for my life and if I hadn’t, I wouldn’t have founded Intellia, nor met my wife.”

He says founding a company like Intellia would never have been possible in Ireland, as the $15 million they received straight out of the gate, followed by another $70 million this September, greatly outbids Ireland.

“It’s a shame the biotech scene isn’t greater in Ireland,” he says. “Given the pharmaceutical industry and the tech industry bleeding through into biotech, countries are making that push, but we still haven’t seen that translate in Ireland. And I do want to see Ireland succeed.”

*This article was first published in October 2015.*
Using his Irishness has helped with success in global business

Stephen Dowling, ecommerce director, Unilever, Rotterdam

Companies across the world are struggling to respond to the changes that ecommerce has brought. While there are undoubtedly opportunities arising from the move away from the high street, there are also plenty of challenges.

This is particularly the case for big consumer goods giants such as Unilever, which experienced one of its worse trading days ever recently after Goldman Sachs questioned its ability to adapt as grocery sales continue to shift online.

There are fears that Unilever, which is behind various well-known products such as Hellmann’s, Knorr, Marmite, Surf and Dove, may fare badly as online stores opt to give more space to rival products than was the case in supermarkets.

One man who feels optimistic about the group’s chances of making it in this new, ever-changing environment is Dubliner Stephen Dowling, who is global ecommerce director at Unilever’s European headquarters in Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

Charlie Taylor
“No matter what industry sector you are operating in, you’re likely to have been impacted by the rise of ecommerce, which has come along like a speeding train and caused massive disruption,” he says.

“By 2017, there will be an estimated one billion tablets and 2.5 billion smartphones – giving us more phones than toothbrushes – so that gives you an idea of the scale of change going on. Consumer goods are no different in being affected by what is happening, but we see potential growth opportunities for us in this space.

“Whether it is shoppers buying online through Tesco.com or Walmart or buying from brands directly or even using start-up disruptive services, the role I have is to help my company embrace the change and help unlock the next generation of growth.”

Dowling, who comes from Kilnamanagh in south Dublin, joined Unilever straight after college and has slowly worked his way up the corporate ladder. Having spent four years with the firm in Dublin, he moved first to London, where he spent a couple of years, and then on to the Netherlands, where he has been based since last September.

“The main difference in living here after London is that there’s less to do but my quality of life has really increased,” he says. “I live in The Hague and am about five minutes away from the coast and love the fact that it’s easy to cycle about without all the congestion you get living in a big city.”

Dowling’s interest in consumer behaviour started when he was young.

“Having initially wanted to be a garda and then a dietician, I gave serious consideration to joining the family firm. My father George owned Classic Shopfitting Contractors, which was one of Ireland’s leading store design and fitout companies. Having spent many summers working there while at school, I got a lot of exposure to how people shop and why, as well as an insight into the art and science of influencing all of that,” he says.

*Internships*

After studying for a degree in marketing, during which he did a number of internships with Unilever Ireland, Dowling stayed on at college to do a master’s in international business.

“Every summer during college I worked in Unilever Ireland’s customer department while all my friends went off on their J-1s,” he says.

“It was an amazing experience as it gave me a great insight into the way big businesses operate. I then decided to do the master’s because I always wanted to go overseas at some point and thought it would help.”

Having interned at Unilever, Dowling went to work for the company after completing his education, starting out with a role in category management.
“About 94 per cent of Irish households bought one of our products in the last 12 weeks, so that shows you how big the company is in Ireland. It was great to get the opportunity to work with great retailers such as Dunnes and Tesco across all of Unilever’s categories in Dublin,” he says.

During his time with the company here, he was promoted a number of times, eventually becoming a national account manager.

However, when the chance to move to its global head office in London came up, he jumped at it.

“I was doing very well in Ireland but was worried I might find myself too much in a comfort zone so while it was a big change, it felt important to leave the nest and give London a go for a few years,” he says.

Promotion

During his time in England, Dowling worked as a global customer and shopper marketing manager for a short while before the chance of promotion to his current role and another move abroad.

“London was Dublin but on a bigger scale and I wanted something new so it was exciting to move again. Initially when I moved here, I started to learn the language but realised I’d overestimated how difficult it might be getting along, as something like 90 per cent of the population can speak English and more than 40 per cent of those living in the Hague are expats,” he says.

One of the things that keeps Ireland close to hand is Dowling’s involvement with the Den Haag GAA club.

“I couldn’t believe it when I saw there was a club here, and it’s fantastic as we have a really mixed team with players from countries like Egypt, Belgium and Wales. I love seeing other cultures embracing our national sport,” he says.

Dowling is also convinced that being Irish has helped his career progression.

“I think that we have an emotional intelligence like no other nation. Our ability to build a rapport with other people and embrace change is incredible and I’m sure that as an Irish citizen I’ve benefited from that,” he says.

This article was first published in September 2015.