

A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS

Businesses that learn from others are twice as likely to survive for five years or more. **Stefan Volak** investigates how a little help can go a long way.

"Businesses value the help they get from other businesses more than any other form of support," says Sophie Hardwick, of Get Mentoring. "They put much more trust in the insights from someone who has been there before them, and overcome the same issues they're facing, particularly during start-up."

The FSB has been instrumental in the Get Mentoring scheme, launched in 2011 by the Small Firms Enterprise Development Initiative

(SFEDI), to build a community of volunteer mentors willing to share their knowledge and experience.

A mentor can make a huge difference to the success of a small business or newly-established enterprise, a fact borne out by research which found that 70 per cent of small businesses who received mentoring survived for five years or more - double the rate compared with non-mentored entrepreneurs.

"Mentoring is about drawing on your experience to support a new

and growing business, often as they tackle issues that are common to many businesses, such as recruiting staff, finding new premises or dealing with cashflow," says Sophie.

"It is not about handing out free advice or actually doing the work. You're there as a sounding board, relaying your experience of how you dealt with a situation, and very often just encouraging your mentee to 'hang on in there' when the going gets tough."

But it's not all one-way. Apart from the satisfaction of helping a fellow business, which is the biggest motivation, mentors also learn from the experience.

"Sharing their knowledge gives mentors the opportunity to reflect

how they run their own business, and apply new insights they've learned through the training," says Sophie. "They very often come away feeling they have gained as much as they have given."

Get Mentoring has put thousands of mentors through training and the focus has now switched to promoting the pool of available expertise and helping businesses connect with mentors through SFEDI's sister organisation, the Institute of Enterprise and Entrepreneurs (IoEE) and other mentoring organisations.

• To meet a mentor who has completed the Get Mentoring training, visit www.fsb.org.uk/ mentoring for details of events planned.

MAUREEN AND AMANDA BURSEY SOS SWIM, BROADSTONE, DORSET

Maureen, a swimming teacher since the 1980s, set up her shop in 2003 to supply swim schools, with an online sales presence as well as a mobile shop, which she took to competitive events. Amanda joined her mother in 2010 to help grow the business.

They sought the help of Dorset Business Mentoring (www.dorsetmentoring.org.uk) when they realised that introducing new ideas at the same time as trying to streamline a business with three different revenue strands was proving taxing.

"There was a conflict between our goal to expand and the need to implement a bit of structure," said Amanda. "We had no shortage of ideas, and saw lots of opportunity for growth, but found we were firefighting most of the time."

Under the guidance of their mentor, Ross Nichols, they began a process of identifying where time and effort was being wasted. The most immediate obstacle to progress was their outdated till system, which needed a lot



of manual processes, and which in turn, meant time spent correcting input errors.

"We could see that we needed a new system," said Maureen. "Although it was a big step for a small business, the investment has freed up time for us to focus on the activities that make money and do it better."

Over the 18 months since, Amanda has put much more effort into marketing, notably through a successful social media campaign during the Olympics to promote the SWANS range of swimming goggles, for which SOS Swim is the sole UK distributor.

The business is buoyant, having recorded an upturn in revenue of nearly 40 per cent in the last figures, and the Burseys are bubbling with new ideas. "We're a stronger business now," said Amanda.

"We look at things in a different way, evaluating ideas and setting goals objectively rather than emotionally."

Maureen added: "A lot of this is plain commonsense, but it really helped to have someone looking in from outside the business to help us see it."

ROSS NICHOLS BUSINESSMENTORINGSERVICES.CO.UK, SALISBURY

"The best definition of mentoring is: 'An ear to listen, a brain to pick and a push in the right direction,'" said Ross, who started mentoring on a voluntary basis after a career in the Royal Engineers, which included gaining an MBA from Cranfield University.

He quickly spotted the potential when he began mentoring SOS Swim in late 2010, but also saw that the business was mired in inefficiency.

"They were ambitious and had lots of ideas for growth, but were held back by inefficient processes, and needed help to identify where to start. Another thing, which had to be handled carefully, was the family dynamic, and the tension that could have arisen with mother and daughter each wanting to travel at different speeds.

"But it was fantastic to see the way they rose to the challenge and constructed a shared vision of the future."

When the investment in a new system had eliminated the waste, Ross then worked with Amanda and Maureen to identify the value streams in the business

and how best to grow the revenue from them.

"They quickly seized hold of this idea and turned it into a five-year plan. They had really got onto the front foot and were driving the business, rather than being driven by it," he said. "At that point, I knew my work with them was largely done."

Having worked with SOS Swim for a year, Ross, who is committee member of Salisbury Branch of the FSB, has gone on to set up on his own as Business Mentoring Services Ltd.

"As a mentor, seeing people improve and achieve success is inspiring. You listen, challenge, and help them understand their situation so they can make an informed decision, but never recommend a course of action.

"The aim is to exit the business at the earliest possible moment, when the client is standing on their own two feet. The best way for that to happen is for them to be used to making their own decisions, not relying on you."



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