

Make the most of mentoring

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Business coaches are not just for corporate high-flyers, they can benefit any enterprise.

At first glance \$22,000 might seem like a lot of money for a small business to spend on a business coach. But for Eamonn Donnellan, who started a now successful building-inspection consultancy with no business experience behind him, it has been repaid many times over.

Likewise for DeMo Design partners Lisa Molloy and Paul Devonshire who spend about \$5500 a year on business coaching. They say it is an important factor in their business's survival in a highly competitive industry (see story right).

Many people assume that business coaches are only for the high-flyers of the corporate world - those with big salaries and big ambitions.

But bringing in outside help can be a smart move for businesses of all sizes, even sole traders.

When Donnellan, a building surveyor, was made redundant in 1994 he decided to set up his own business conducting pest and building inspections for home buyers.

"The problem was that I didn't know how to run a business, even after all those years in college, no one ever teaches you that," Donnellan says.

"I didn't know how to go out and market the business or even run the accounts."

After five or six months of "pottering away" on his own, Donnellan met a business coach, Geoff Golding, at a small-business group and signed up for a six-month course at a cost of \$1200 a month.

"The business was barely scraping by, zero profit, so I went for broke," he says.

"After the second month, business was slowly taking off and about six months after that it had come so far that Sibeal [Donnellan's wife, Sibeal Ni Mhaille, who had previously worked in recruitment] was able to come on board.

"That was one of our goals, to run the business together." Since the completion of the six-month program Donnellan and his wife have continued to use Golding's services as needed and are now looking at franchising or licensing their business.

They have spent \$22,000 on business coaching and say it is the best thing that has happened to their business.

"Our business has increased seven-fold," Donnellan says.

"What you get out of it far outweighs the cost; looking back on it, it's peanuts."

Donnellan says Golding helped set up systems and processes that are still the backbone of the business three years later.

"It's like being a learner driver, you don't want to learn any bad habits from the start," he says. "When you're a small business, you don't know what the right decisions are, so it's good to have a father figure, if you like, to bounce ideas around and keep you on track."

"You can work things out yourself, but it takes much longer, and it can be a bit lonely in business by yourself"

"It probably would have taken us 10 years [on our own] to get to where we are now."

Donnellan says Golding's motivational influence and work-life balance strategies have also had a knock-on effect on their personal lives. "It gives us confidence and makes us happier, and we know how to achieve our goals."

Wanted: partners in design

Case study: Lisa Molloy and Paul Devonshire, DeMo Design, Darlington

Letting business development and marketing slide to the bottom of the priority list is no longer an option for DeMo Design's partners, Lisa Molloy and Paul Devonshire.

Knowing they have a fortnightly teleconference with their business coach, Robert Gerrish, drives them to allocate time to these important activities, which were previously pushed aside by day-to-day concerns.

"It keeps us on our toes because we know we have this fortnightly call coming up," Molloy says. "We're wasting his time, and ours, if we haven't achieved some of the tasks he has set us for the fortnight."

DeMo Design operates in the highly competitive industry of creating packaging for consumer goods and both Molloy and Devonshire came from creative rather than business backgrounds.

"About three years ago, we really felt that we needed some guidance in how to create new business," Molloy says.

"The marketing side of things isn't our strong point - we're good at creating packaging - and we really weren't putting time aside to concentrate on new business."

The pair had tried employing a business manager, at a cost of about \$100,000 a year, but felt he was pushing the business in the wrong direction. They ended the arrangement.

"Robert works within the parameters of our business model and we don't have the expense of employing a full-time person," Molloy says. "It works for us and as long as it does, that's the way we will keep things."