

An entrepreneur's drive and determination can only get them so far. There eventually comes a point when taking on an employee becomes essential. But where does one turn first? We speak to three business owners about their first hires and how they've become indispensable to their respective enterprises

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Dr Daniel Elford,
co-founder and CTO,
Sonobex

Sonobex

Many of the country's brightest tech firms took their initial steps within the walls of a higher education institute. Sonobex, the acoustic engineering start-up, is no exception. The company's innovative noise reduction technology was first devised by co-founders Dr Daniel Elford and Dr Luke Chalmers at Loughborough University where the two were studying for their PHD. "Our PHD supervisor said we should patent the idea because it looked like there was a commercial application at the end of it," says Elford. "I had never planned to spin out a company and we didn't even realise there'd be some commercial benefits to it until we filed for this patent."

This lack of business acumen made the appointment of somebody with significant commercial experience, especially in the tech space, an essential first hire. "Myself and Luke had both done one module of business during university. That was basically the extent of our business skills," Elford admits. "We had a lot of enquiries from external companies interested in the technology but we didn't really know

how to translate it from the lab and into the real world."

Elford's enterprise fellowship at the Royal Academy of Engineering instilled a certain degree of commercial thinking but he soon realised he'd have to learn most of it on the job and from those who had been there and done it. With the help of a seasoned business mentor, Elford and Chalmers hired a business development executive in the shape of Paul Gooch, a serial entrepreneur who has spent the last 15 years investing in and working with numerous high-tech ventures.

Initially contracted for six months by Loughborough University as an external consultant to Sonobex, Gooch is now the firm's CEO. And Elford believes the company wouldn't be where it is today without the experience and passion for the enterprise that Gooch brought to the table. "We'd still be stuck in a physics lab at Loughborough University," he laughs. "Paul totally bought into the vision that we had so it is good to have somebody on board who totally believes in it as much as we do." ▢



Paul Gooch,
CEO,
Sonobex

WORDS: ADAM PESCOD



Dean Bowes,
office manager,
Freshcig

Freshcig

Employing somebody to hold the fort while you're out and about securing all-important deals is often a wise move for an entrepreneur. Ben Wilson, founder of Freshcig, the e-cigarette company, followed such a path when recruiting Dean Bowes as office manager. "Having an office manager as our first hire was the most important element in setting up the business as customer service is the top priority, whether it's business-to-consumer or business-to-business," he says. "Having an 'all-rounder' who could handle this – take orders over the phone, pack, send internet orders and manage stock – meant that I could focus on other key activities in order to expand."

Experience in a similar position wasn't an essential requirement for Wilson at a time when getting the business off the ground was the priority. In fact, it was the skills and disciplines that Bowes had built up as a chef that made him the ideal candidate. "As an SME, all employees, especially in the

early stages, need to be flexible and pitch in with tasks that wouldn't be in a 'typical' role associated with the title," says Wilson. "The fact that he was a head chef and could obviously cope with multiple tasks and people management meant that he ticked the boxes for this and the customer service element too."

Wilson believes that Bowes' loyalty and attitude has played a large part in the company's ability to retain customers and build a strong brand identity. "He has a personable manner and our customers have got to know him well over the years, especially those who have placed telephone orders for a long period of time," Wilson explains. "He is one of the reasons a lot of those customers remain loyal to the brand." Such qualities are what every entrepreneur should be looking for in a first hire, Wilson concludes. "You don't want someone who will leave after a month or two of learning the ropes and leave you doing those tasks again before having to train someone else up."



Ben Wilson,
founder and managing
director,
Freshcig

Cause4


Founded in 2009, Cause4 offers strategic support to charities and social enterprises in the charity, arts, sports and education sectors. The company soon set about launching its own graduate training programme as a way of finding the right people to help drive the business forward. "We look for people who have got an absolute passion for the charitable sector, are quite business-minded and entrepreneurial and are able to learn really fast," says Michelle Wright, founder and CEO of Cause4. "We knew that we were going to have to grow our own talent, basically."

Ben Wilson was the first graduate to complete the programme and was employed as development coordinator in 2010. Being a start-up, Cause4 ultimately required somebody who could do a bit of everything. "The role that we ask our graduates to do is really varied so he needed to learn how to write a grant application, he needed to learn how to write a sponsorship application, he had to be able

to learn strategy very fast," says Wright. "He needed at the other end of the scale to write good blog content."

It's safe to say both Wright and Wilson have never looked back, with the latter rising through the ranks to become head of development before being given the chance to build and head up the company's sports division; something very close to his heart. His achievements thus far have merited it, in Wright's opinion.

"Last year, Ben raised almost £4m for our charitable clients, which, if he was in the charitable sector, would be phenomenal. But he almost doesn't realise that was phenomenal," she comments. "He is part of our senior management team now and we are just looking into share options for employees. He will be one of the first that would deserve it."

Wright concludes: "Ben's ambition is to set up his own social enterprise – I want to hold onto him for a good few years yet and we have got enough going on to keep developing him." 



Michelle Wright,
founder and CEO,
Cause4



Ben Wilson,
head of development,
Cause4