
Record number of returning emigrants keen to start businesses

There has been an increase in applications from returning Irish emigrants for [Back for Business](#), a Government-backed business programme.

Returning home has been bittersweet for Irish emigrants in the face of the Covid-19 crisis, but many are determined to make the best of it and give business a go.

There has been an increase in those seeking applications for a free initiative to help returned emigrants start and develop businesses in Ireland. This is the fourth year of the very successful Back for Business developmental programme, which is funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Since the call for applications was launched in mid-December by Minister of State for Overseas Development Aid and Diaspora Colm Brophy, TD, there has been great interest in the initiative.

“Back for Business has been very popular since it started four years ago, and we generally saw an increase in applications over the Christmas period,” said Back for Business founder and managing director of Fitsimons Consulting. “However, this year, there was an unprecedented demand for the programme even before the call for applicants opened.

“We believe this is down to a number of factors, but in particular due to Brexit and the pandemic. People are realising that they can work remotely from wherever they want in the world and that where they are living right now is not as attractive as it used to be, due to various lockdowns. People want to come home and be close to their families. These major global events have put that desire into stark relief.”

Return of the natives: Still time to apply

Paula Fitzsimons of [Fitzsimons Consulting](#), founder of *Back to Business*

The programme has seen a threefold increase in the number of application forms requested from returning or returned emigrants who wish to be considered for the initiative.

However, as all places are allocated through an assessment process which takes place after the deadline, there is still time for people to apply right up to 25 January.

The Back for Business initiative was established to foster and support entrepreneurial activity among returned emigrants or those returning to live in Ireland. It is aimed at those who have lived abroad for at least a year and have returned in the last three years or are planning to return to live in Ireland in the near future.

The 2021 programme will run from February to July 2021 and there is no charge for those selected to participate. The closing date for applications is January 25, 2021 and while interest has been high this year, applications will be accepted up until that date when a competitive selection process will choose up to 40 entrepreneurs who will participate.

An additional ten places are also being made available on a further development phase for those who completed a Back for Business cycle previously.

Those interested in learning more can download a brochure and register their interest in receiving an application form by visiting www.backforbusiness.com

“The design of the initiative takes into account the specific challenges that returning emigrants face, as well as the more general barriers that all early-stage entrepreneurs encounter,” Fitzsimons explained. “Those who participated on previous cycles are very enthusiastic about the benefits that they derived from taking part.

“There is still time to apply and be considered for the programme, as places are not allocated on a first-come first-served basis. The closing date for receipt of completed applications is 25 January. After the closing date, each application will be assessed by our panel of Lead Entrepreneurs to ensure that the places available go to the most deserving candidates.”

Challenges facing returning emigrants

The number one challenge facing returning emigrants, who are starting businesses, is a lack of networks, professional contacts and local knowledge. These have weakened in the years that they have spent away from Ireland.

The peer support, which is at the heart of Back for Business, immediately addresses this challenge and helps participants to strengthen their network. At the same time, the participants get a better understanding of the changed entrepreneurial ecosystem and learn about the supports available for those establishing businesses here.

Past participants on the first three years of the programme have recorded increased sales, created new jobs, and won export contracts. The combined turnover of the 2020 group tripled during the programme – despite the Covid pandemic.

The Lead Entrepreneurs, who participate in a voluntary capacity, are: Áine Denn, co-founder and formerly of Altify; Heather Reynolds, co-founder of Eishtec, which has been acquired by Infosys BPM; Nikki Evans, founder of PerfectCard, now part of EML Payments; Thomas Ennis, founder of the Thomas Ennis Group and Susan Spence, co-founder and President of SoftCo.

Those selected to join Back for Business this year will take part in round table sessions, focused on goals and milestones, and facilitated by voluntary Lead Entrepreneurs, who have experience of successfully starting and growing a business.

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