
24 disruptors and trailblazers changing Irish business

Our selection of 24 Irish women and men disruptors and trailblazers who are shaping the business world is defined by a number of characteristics, the most common being fearlessness.

Our selection is based on women and men of various ages who have not only put their belief in good ideas but are still changing the world around us, driving new ways of doing business but with sustainability at the core.

John Beckett, ChannelSight/Forestry Partners

One of Ireland's original e-commerce pioneers, John Beckett, CEO of [ChannelSight](#), first flew to prominence when as a teenager in 1999 he built the very first Ryanair website along with a school pal for £20,000. Since then he has built up a global e-commerce business called ChannelSight which is key to the e-commerce strategy of for global brands such as Bosch, Philips, Coca Cola and Sony. In recent months Beckett spearheaded a new social enterprise called [Forestry Partners](#) which has a 12-month roadmap to get to 250 Irish partners with the goal of creating at least 25,000 tons of CO2 equivalent offsets and achieving 200 acres of planted or committed trees.

Aimee-Louise Carton, KeepAppy

Aimée-Louise Carton is a graduate of Trinity College Dublin and the University of Amsterdam and founder of [KeepAppy](#). Following a long history of mental illness, Aimée almost took her life on the bridge beside her house in 2017, however her life was saved by a helpline volunteer and her beautiful dog Aura. Since then, through KeepAppy, she has been on a mission to provide access to preventative care for the two in three individuals who are suffering from a mental illness but will never seek help. She is determined to stop anyone else from walking up onto a bridge like she did. Last summer, Carton took part in the [Tangent Pioneers programme](#) run by Trinity College Dublin that sends start-ups for a week-long intensive programme in the US each year.

Dylan Collins, SuperAwesome

One of the stalwarts of the Irish tech scene and one of Europe's most experienced digital media entrepreneurs, Dylan Collins cut his entrepreneurial chops while at Trinity College in Dublin where, along with Sean Blanchfield and Ronan Perceval, they established Phorest, a company that provides technology to the salon industry. Around the same time Collins and Blanchfield built a company called Demonware that made it possible for multiplayer game-play across consoles. Demonware was bought by Activision for \$17m. In recent weeks ThinkBusiness reported how Microsoft's venture capital arm took a majority stake in Collins' London-based adtech firm [SuperAwesome](#). SuperAwesome is a kid-safe marketing platform that operates as a bridge for brands to reach those aged between six and 16. It includes a number of channels across physical, digital and mobile, including its "Instagram for Kids" app, PopJam.

Paul Connell, Pure Telecom

Paul Connell has been an entrepreneur since he was a schoolboy. At the age of 15, he bought 500 miniature Christmas trees, sprayed them white, put them in pots bought from Woodie's and sold them door-to-door in his Churchtown neighbourhood for £5 each. 35 years on, through the company he co-founded with his business partner Alan McGonnell, Today, as CEO of [Pure Telecom](#), Connell continues to provide customers with a simple – but vital – service through the provision of broadband and phone services across Ireland. Paul's company, Pure Telecom, has been a major disruptor in the Irish telecoms market. It offers customers competitively-priced services by uniquely smart shopping the best deals from Ireland's leading wholesale operators in order to drive down the cost of fixed-line phone and internet and ensure customers get the best quality broadband.

Norman Crowley, Crowley Carbon/Electrify

Norman Crowley is a successful businessman who started and sold three businesses for more than \$750m before he was 40. Last year he revealed plans to create 150 new jobs as part of a €50m investment in his latest venture [Electrifi](#), the first company to manufacture cars in Ireland since Ford closed its manufacturing plant in Cork 40 years ago.

The Cork-born entrepreneur sold his previous business Inspired Gaming Group for \$500m in late 2008 to a private equity fund. In recent weeks, ThinkBusiness reported how Crowley's energy

services business Cool Planet Group [raised \\$31m in funding](#) from French investment group Tikehau Capital, which has almost €24bn in assets under management.

In [an interview with ThinkBusiness](#) last year Crowley described his group, which includes Crowley Carbon, as an energy efficiency business that helps corporates such as Musgraves, an early client, figure out how they can save hundreds of millions, if not billions, on their energy by optimising use of solar and wind sources and installing new technologies for better efficiency. “We have a vision for Crowley Carbon to save \$1bn a year in energy, which we are well on the way to,” he said at the time.

Shane Curran, Evervault

At just 19 years of age, Dubliner Shane Curran has clocked up more achievements than most people twice his age. The founder of security start-up [Evervault](#) hit the headlines this year after it emerged he [raised \\$3.2m in seed funding](#) led by venerable Silicon Valley venture capital firm Sequoia Capital along with Kleiner Perkins, Frontline, and SV angel along with some unnamed tech innovators and investors. He apparently raised the funding within days of doing his first Leaving Cert exam. In 2017 stole the show at the BT Young Scientist & Technology Exhibition as overall winner when his encryption project using quantum, secured storage, wowed the judges. He previously hit the headlines as a skilled programmer at just 11 years of age building apps. Curran is currently on a “leave of absence” from UCD in order to focus on growing Evervault.

Fiona Edwards Murphy, Apis Protect

Fiona Edwards Murphy began her doctoral research at UCC into the application of sensors in honeybee hives. That research has spawned a business called [ApisProtect](#) that has developed early warning system so beekeepers can give at-risk hives immediate attention and improve bee health. The technology also gives beekeepers actionable insights and alerts to help prevent losses and increase colony productivity. The company last year announced 25 new jobs after raising an investment round led by international venture capital investors Finistere Ventures and Atlantic Bridge Capital along with Radicle Growth, the Yield Lab and Enterprise Ireland.

Bobbie Healy, Manna

For Bobby Healy, founder of [Manna.Aero](#), the sky is the limit, literally. Prior to founding Manna.Aero, Healy was CTO of CarTrawler and was instrumental in driving the business from a start-up to an enterprise with more than 500 people enterprise. With Manna.Aero Healy is championing the delivery of fast food via aerial drones. Consumers will be able to simply tap their phone and a drone will travel to where they want the food delivered and food will float down at the end of a biodegradable linen thread. Sounds futuristic? Well, Healy is nothing if not driven and Manna has already attracted backing from venture capital firms Elkstone Capital and Frontline Ventures. In recent weeks we reported how Manna along with Cubic Telecom wowed the pivotal Consumer Electronics Show in the US with their joint work on drone food deliveries. The company also [recently raised €3m](#) in funding from from Dynamo VC, a fund focused on logistics.

Norah Khaldi, Nuritas

Nora Khaldi is the founder of [Nuritas](#), a company that uses big data to discover peptides that will influence the future of food, Dr Nora Khaldi has landed major investments from figures like U2's Bono and The Edge as well as Marc Benioff and last year became the first Irish biotech to gain direct support from the European Investment Bank (EIB) with €30m in funding. The former mathematician founded Nuritas in 2014 and uses technology to mine DNA and protein data from plant materials to discover new food components to help prevent, manage and even cure diseases.

Nikki Lannen, WarDucks

<https://twitter.com/nikkilannen/status/1220039312592572417>

In 2013, Nikki Lannen left her job at Facebook in Dublin to establish her own video games brand [WarDucks](#), which is on a mission to build immersive games and has so far built six best-selling games so far including Sneaky Bears, RollerCoaster Legends and My Smooshy Mushy. In recent weeks the Dublin start-up played host to Apple CEO Tim Cook during his visit to Ireland to be honoured for Apple's 40th anniversary in Ireland. Last year WarDucks raised €3.3m in funding to become a big player in augmented reality, location-based mobile gaming. Prior to establishing WarDucks, Lannen was a founding member of the Facebook games team where she helped top games businesses scale on the social media platform.

Chris Kelly, Tracworx

Chris Kelly co-founded medical software company [Tracworx](#) while he was in college in 2016 with co-founders Fionn Barron and CTO Eoin O'Brien. Tracworx has developed a patient tracking system that uses only the existing Wi-Fi networks in a hospital, allowing them to automate their data collection and to generate reports using real-time data. In December Tracworx was named the [overall winner of the InterTradeIreland Seedcorn investor readiness competition](#) and received a cash prize of €100,000.

Roseanne Longmore, Coroflo

[Coroflo](#) CEO Rosanne Longmore left a high-flying career in investment finance to co-found Coroflo in 2016 with Helen Barry and James Travers. Coroflo plans to launch its ground-breaking breastfeeding device in late 2020. Coroflow recently raised €1m in funding as well as a €2.2m accelerator grant from the European Commission under its Horizon 2020 programme, bringing total investment in Coroflow to €4m.

Denis McCarthy, Fexco

If anyone is any doubt about building a scalable, world class business from the regions of Ireland then look no further than [Fexco](#), an Irish fintech company based in Kerry that since its origins in 1981 has grown to employ 2,500 people in 29 countries. In recent weeks it revealed a €21m investment in a new RDI Hub in Killorglin where it was founded that will [generate 305 jobs and up to 35 start-ups](#). Denis McCarthy was appointed CEO of Fexco in January 2015, having previously held the position of non-executive director. He has a degree in Mathematics and founded Annadale Technologies, a software development company specialising in the design and development of web-based transaction processing applications. Denis also founded Aviso, a payments software company.

Dylan McGrath, Shelbourne Social

<https://twitter.com/socialdublin4/status/1225841658702573568>

Dylan McGrath is a celebrity chef and restaurateur best know for operating six restaurants along with his business partners Vinny and Gerard Melinn, including the successful Fade Street Social. McGrath rose to prominence at Mint, a small restaurant in Ranelagh where he earned a Michelin Star. He followed this up with Fade Street Social, Rustic Stone, Taste at Rustic, Brasserie Sixty6 and most recently the Shelbourne Social. McGrath is also a judge on MasterChef Ireland.

Claire McHugh, Axonista

Claire McHugh – Claire McHugh is the CEO and founder of [Axonista](#), which powers audience engagement for broadcasters through smart devices. She founded Axonista in 2010 with Daragh Ward and previously worked in sports TV with Setanta. In 2017 the company landed a €1.7m Horizon 2020 grant to help broadcasters to bring rich, interactive video apps to market faster. McHugh is a digital and future TV enthusiast and is a frequent speaker at global industry events about the future of television.

Colm McLoughlin, Dubai Duty Free

After 50 years at the helm of [Dubai Duty Free](#), a \$2bn a year retail giant, Colm McLoughlin shows no signs of calling it a day. McLoughlin abandoned plans to become a dentist and became a trainee at Woolworths in 1969 working his way up to manager. While on a visit back to Ireland he saw a job advertised for the Duty Free business in Shannon. “I had no idea what it meant, I went for an interview, I was offered a job and I took it and that is exactly 50 years ago,” he told *ThinkBusiness* [in an interview](#) last year. McLoughlin built on the legacy of fellow Irishman Dr Brendan O’Regan who created the world’s first airport duty free at Shannon in 1947. “I’m happy I went to Dubai; the first full year there which was 1984 the Dubai Duty Free had a revenue of \$20m, it has grown up considerably. We now employ 6,200 people. Our business last year was in excess of \$2bn and we are the single largest duty free operation at a single airport in the world and I’m very happy about that.”

Philip McMichael, AMI

Philip McMichael is the CEO of [AMI](#), the largest secure IT disposal company in Ireland. Philip got his start in the industry running a computer repair shop with a small team on the Boucher Road in Belfast. When people started to bring in their old computers and other ICT, as a true disruptive entrepreneur, Philip identified a gap in the market for securely disposing of these devices and recovering the value from them.

“In the early days, people simply passed their old computers on within the family, disposed of them in landfill, or maybe one or two more security conscious people thought to shred their old hard drives. Seeing examples of this every day, I saw a big opportunity to delete the data on these devices and then resell a refurbished machine - benefitting everybody involved.”

This was the market disrupting opportunity that led to AMI being established in 2001. From humble beginnings, Philip has helped AMI grow significantly over the years to become a €7.6 million turnover organisation with 75 staff working from two processing facilities in Dublin and Belfast. It is targeting €10.5 million revenue with a total headcount of 90 by 2021. Today, AMI actually returns money to customers who dispose of decent quality machines. In 2019, it returned over €4 million to its private and public sector customers throughout Ireland and Northern Ireland. It also provides shredding services in Ireland, the UK and across Western Europe.

Aoife McNamara, Aoife Ireland

Aoife McNamara is the 24-year-old founder of the [Aoife Ireland](#) clothing brand. The graduate of Limerick School of Art & Design has developed a brand that is all about designing a sustainable future of fashion using Irish fabrics. As well as this she has won commissions from celebrity blogger Suzanne Jackson as well as endorsements from celebrities like Roz Purcell, Louise Cooney and Vogue Williams. In a recent [interview with ThinkBusiness](#) McNamara said she is happy to remain based in Limerick and travels for meetings and shows. “This year I’m going to be launching into the Kilkenny stores and hopefully in New York. I’m already launched in the UK and my plan is to be recognised internationally as a label.”

David McRedmond, An Post

https://twitter.com/UPU_UN/status/1226906258541862912

The CEO of An Post, Ireland’s post office network, David McRedmond is a familiar face in the Irish business landscape having previously headed up TV3, now Virgin Media TV. McRedmond makes the disruptor list for driving ambitious plans to achieve zero emissions postal delivery across all cities in Ireland by the end of 2020. McRedmond made the pledge when the company revealed a new fleet of electric vehicles and in doing so became the first postal service in the world to eliminate carbon emissions in a capital city. This will contribute to the air quality of 512,000 people living and working in the city every day. An Post plans to do the same in Cork, Galway, Kilkenny, Limerick and Waterford by the end of 2020, benefiting the lives of 700,000 more people. The postal provider has already invested €7.5m in its electric fleet of 212 vehicles and this will exceed 900 electric vehicles within two years.

Breege O’Donoghue, Primark/Penneys

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CorIsH3_UAU

Breege O’Donoghue makes this list of disruptors and trailblazers because she continues to shine a light for women in business and young women entrepreneurs through her work as an advisor on the Going for Growth programme but also for being a pioneering trailblazer who broke through the patriarchal world of Irish business in the 1960s to build a global Irish brand. O’Donoghue is a highly experienced former board member of [Primark](#) and her most recent role, until September 2016, was Group Director, Business Development and New Markets. She managed, with others, a business through significant growth and expansion from 17 stores to over 320 in 11 markets. She has had an extremely successful executive career across many functions, with considerable experience in European and US markets, significant experience of leadership, diverse teams and complex cross-functional business projects.

Michael O’Hara, DataSolutions

Managing director of Dublin tech distributor [DataSolutions](#), Michael O'Hara proves that disruption does not always need a revolutionary new idea. A firm believer that for all businesses but particularly so for B2B, the number one buying criteria is good customer service. The age-old value of high-quality service has delivered a unique market edge that is driving explosive growth.

O'Hara's disruptive spurs were shown early on when he identified Citrix System and subsequently became its Irish distributor when Citrix was a tiny company with worldwide revenues of just \$16m. Today it is a global multi-billion-dollar IT giant. He has also had quite the journey from working in the family pub, to taking up his role in DataSolutions with no background in IT or sales – a move that took a great deal of courage and determination. Abiding by a few lessons he's learned along the way, including 'deliver transformational customer service', O'Hara has created a highly successful and very disruptive business and impressive career.

DataSolutions is heading towards €65m in revenue by the end of March 2020, demonstrating how far it has come since the days it operated out of a mews house on Ailesbury Road in Dublin.

Wendy Oke, TeachKloud

<https://twitter.com/SbradyInt/status/1183415426438578176>

Wendy Oke founded [TeachKloud](#) in Cork and plans to address a market estimated to be worth €215bn by 2025. Her cloud-based edtech management platform allows preschool managers to work smart and cut time spent on administration to improve the quality of teaching delivered by all staff. The company recently announced a €750,000 investment. Oke sparked upon the idea while doing her PhD and today the company serves 150 creches and pre-schools across Ireland and has at least 10 employees.

Pat Phelan, SISU Clinic

Another Cork entrepreneur of note is Pat Phelan who has ambitious plans to bring his [SISU Clinic](#) aesthetic chain to the US, starting with New York and Miami. SISU Clinic could be the third time lucky for Phelan who previously exited two businesses Cubic Telecom and Trustev, with the latter being acquired by TransUnion for \$44m. SISU Clinic currently has seven outlets in Cork, Dublin, Belfast and Limerick and Phelan believes it is ready to expand into the US. “The move is imminent. America is ripe for us, it’s a market that is wide open. The first stores will hopefully open this summer in New York and Miami. We also have one of the largest European retail chains that wants to put SISU clinics in its stores. We are also working on a [Amazon] Prime model where people would pay a subscription fee. I won’t say there’s a \$1bn business here, but I would say there’s a very IPO-level business here.”

Patricia Scanlon, Soapbox Labs

Patricia Scanlon, founder of [Soapbox Labs](#), is both a businesswoman and technologist who has developed a speech recognition platform that uses artificial intelligence (AI) to help children aged four to 12 advance their reading skills in such a way that it could address childhood literacy all over the world. Founded by Scanlon in 2013, the company has raised \$5.5m to date and was [recently chosen](#) for a \$30m educational programme at the University of Florida backed by Facebook’s

Mark Zuckerberg to boost literacy among children.

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