

File name: Panel Session – Go Further, Grow Stronger (Exporting from Northern Ireland).mp4

Moderator questions in Bold, Respondents in Regular text.

KEY: Unable to decipher = (inaudible + timecode), **Phonetic spelling** (ph) + timecode), **Missed word** = (mw + timecode), **Talking over each other** = (talking over each other + timecode).

Moderator: We're going to hear from some local companies who are exporting. I'm pleased to welcome Mark Nodder, who many of you will be familiar with. Mark is the joint chief executive of the Makers Alliance, and Invest NI board member. He's gonna come up to the stage along with a range of exporters at different stages in their export journey. They're going to share their export-, they're gonna provide an insight as to how they've used the range of advice, expertise, support and guidance that has assisted them on their journey to go further and grow stronger. So, the people that you're about to hear from are Irene Breen, Irene is the CEO and founder of Bellamoon Limited. She's nervous, happy to say, but committed and very, very happy to be embarking on the next stage of her company's journey. Jackie Devine is the commercial manager of Datactics, Michael Calo is the sales and marketing director of TruCorp, and Con Gallagher is global sales manager of Kiverco. Please give them a very, very warm welcome, they're about to come up, as I say is Mark Nodder. And Mark I think is about to introduce a video as well, so please welcome to the stage and let them take control from this point on.

M: Fantastic, well, if you didn't realise it already, you now know Northern Ireland truly is the centre of the manufacturing universe. One of the things that, that does strike you though when you are a manufacturer and you're trying to grow your business is that actually, the local market is small. There are only 1.8 million people, there's only a limited appetite for how many buses are needed in Northern Ireland, or how many waste recycling machines, or frankly how many-, how many motherhood support kits as well. So, we all have to look to grow our markets outside Northern Ireland, exporting is absolutely something we all have to embrace. So, I'm really pleased to have with, with me four fantastic exponents, who've really grasped these opportunities. The folks are at different stages of their journey and, and getting to know them has been a-, been a lot of fun, and I think that you, you-, you'll enjoy what they have to say. I'm gonna actually ask Irene, if you don't mind, Irene, just to, kind of, kick us off 'cause you've, you've a very small company, but you've, kind of, boldly gone into this during the pandemic, and straight away you're looking to get outside Northern Ireland into the export market. What's, what has been that early experience? What, kind of, challenges have you faced along the way?

F: Yeah, okay, so Bellamoon is a pregnancy and nursing brand, we design products, patented products, for-, aimed basically at mothers who are ambitious, hard-working career women who have children and are therefore exhausted because they're trying to do everything. So, basically, Bellamoon, we launched during lockdown, the May of lockdown, on our UK and Ireland website bellamoon.co, and we-, or the royal we, sorry, it was me in my spare bedroom, basically grew Bellamoon online from zero right up to-, I mean, we're not quite at £1 million yet, but we'll hopefully get there this year. But it's been an incredible journey because we learned all our lessons in the domestic market, we tweaked everything, we perfected

everything. And being, you know, on my own, a, a solo founder, I was very much reliant on the expertise of Invest Northern Ireland who, to be honest, are like this miraculous group of magical fairies that come in and tell me exactly-, before I even know that I need it myself. So, they came to me on several occasions and said, 'Okay, Irene, you need to get ready to export.' So, they said, 'We have this great programme called Going Dutch, and we think, you know, you should apply.' So, I applied and thankfully successfully got onto the program, a very competitive programme to get onto. And I had the pleasure of going to the Netherlands last November, and the minister was there with a delegation on Invest NI as well, and basically it was just a complete eye-opener.

You know, I am at the very early stages of my export journey, it's the first time I am leaving the current territory, and I did not have the confidence, I did not have any idea what to expect. You know, I see these countries and I think, 'Well, they speak a different language, they have different compliance requirements, they have a different currency, you know, how on Earth am I going to be able to do this?' But basically, through this programme, Going Dutch, they held my hand every step of the way, and they organised meetings with maybe seven different companies and they sat me down, beside me, beside, you know, all these people, and I pitched to these partners. And because of that, we're about to enter three territories.

M: So, that's something you-, the, that experience has given you something to really build on now?

F: Gosh, yeah.

M: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

F: Yeah, it's, like, it's given me the, the partner, first of all, the huge potential to grow the business, and also the confidence to do-, to replicate the model in, in other territories. And even today, we're about to launch the bellamoon.de website to Germany tonight.

M: Fantastic.

F: So, well, yeah, it's just been incredible, so-,

M: And I know Jackie, you've-, you also in your company, you've started to look at different opportunities, different jurisdictions, and again you're finding different, kind of, routes to market. I know you-, when we chatted before this, you talked about the Graduate to Export scheme as being one way of actually learning about markets. You-, tell us a little bit more about your experience of that, it'd be interesting to share.

F: Well, we have been in foreign markets all of our twenty year existence, but we have tried to explore more recently in the last couple of years opening up in, in newer jurisdictions. And we know now, especially with COVID, that we don't need bricks and mortar, we, we can do a lot of this remotely, but nothing beats having someone on the ground. And therefore, we did seek out help from the Graduate to Export scheme, we were absolutely delighted, in fact overwhelmed at the calibre of the applicants on that scheme, and I guess it's, it's obvious now, but the, the kind of graduates who were applying for that scheme were ambitious people, and they, they weren't afraid to get on a plane and, and work probably by themselves a lot of the time, and remotely. So, we hired two people on the, the Graduate to Export scheme, we were sorry that we didn't have the, the-, the resources to hire more, and we are certainly going back for more next, next iteration of that scheme. Now, we have been held back by COVID, there's no doubt about that. We, we had assigned one guy to North America and another to APAC, frustratingly haven't managed to get to, to Singapore or Tokyo yet because of the travel restrictions, but we, we do have our North American candidate ready to get on a plane at some stage this month. And we will be hopefully meeting lots of people that the Invest NI team over there have introduced us to. So, that certainly gives us a short circuit for introductions, and it-, the scheme itself allows us to have somebody on the ground actually meeting people and talking about our company on a face-to-face basis, which is priceless.

M: Brilliant. And, and-, and you, you've mentioned you're, you're looking to get two, is it two graduates?

F: Yeah.

Moderator: So, one for, which markets are they gonna be going to?

F: Well, because a lot of the time our, our, our clients are in the fintech business, so they're in, in finance and banking, and the obvious place to go therefore is North America, and, and Singapore, and APAC region, where a lot of these big banks have their head offices, so that was-, that was, sort of, the obvious choice for those locations. I mean, a second obvious choice is that they're English speaking, although in, in the case of, you know, Tokyo we, we have had to do a bit of ground work there. Luckily, our grad export candidate is, is, is going to night classes to learn the language.

Moderator: Brilliant.

F: We've managed to get some assistance to, to translate our website and some of our collateral, but a lot of these, these big banks, you know, English is their first language that they are happy to, to connect with us in, so that's helpful. But the Invest NI team have also been really helpful about cultural changes and, and differences between working over there, and, and one of them is not to be late for meetings, which sometimes I think in Northern Ireland we can be very good at, and, you know, being very polite about accepting business cards and, and just little nuggets like that which really help to build confidence about,

'We know about you, we know and we understand your culture, we understand your problems, and we want to do business with you,' so that's been a really helpful aspect too.

Moderator: I mean, it does sound like from what you're saying there that, you know, you can get a lot of the relationship with the-, with the folks at Invest, but you've got to invest a little in Invest to get that back, is that right?

F: Yeah, yeah, and, I mean, we have spent the last year or so researching these, these areas, and, and looking at the events that are there and, and looking to see who we could actually make introductions to, but, but using Invest NI as a soundboard on what's right and what's wrong, what's more likely to be fruitful, has been really helpful as well, it's been a protection of that investment.

Moderator: Brilliant. Mike, Jackie was talking then a little bit about how some preconceptions of how to go about exporting get turned on their head a little bit with the pandemic for, for, kind of, obvious reasons, and I know you've been on a bit of a journey there and you've got a couple of war stories, what's been your experience? What have you learned? What have you changed, I guess, and what's the mindset now?

M: Well, is this working? Yeah. Well, when I-, when I started off with TruCorp, which was twelve years ago, I was actually using a lot of Invest NI support to get me around to different parts of the world, mostly to the US, because it's our biggest market, and I like going home, so, you know, I was-, I was doing it as often as I could, and business was growing for our us, so, so it was good. So, I spent a time a lot of time where, you know, I was an airport warrior, I was here, there, all over the world, and then the pandemic hit and our sales grew as I stayed home, so I found out either we're doing something-, we're, we were-, we were doing something wrong all along, or we got really lucky, so I think-, I think, my partner likes to tell me, 'The, the less you're in front of clients, the better we sell.'

Moderator: Yeah, and, and your business is, is fascinating, actually, because you're, you're in the area of medical mannequin simulators, is that right? You wanna tell people a little bit about that?

M: Yes. So, we, we, we do medical simulation mannequins, airway management, trauma, ultrasound products, things of that nature, and then we've, we've got a couple of medical simulation apps as well, so.

Moderator: Brilliant, and you find, I mean, like, it's one of the remarkable things about Northern Ireland companies, able to compete on the international stage.

M: Yeah. You know, what we found out was that we're not only able to compete, we're able to win, you know, we've, we, we, we feel like we have, you know, the world's best products at what we do, and we

continue to grow year in-, year in and year out. Our, our company, when, when my partner and I took it over, there was only three of us in the company, and now it's a team of 30, so it's, it's really grown over the last five years, it's, it's been-, it's been great.

Moderator: Great, it's a great story, and it's a great inspiration for others as well.

M: Just to give you an idea of how much export we do, when, when I started in TruCorp we did, I think it was, like, 95% of our business what's, was outside of the UK. Now, it's, we've grown within the UK, but it's still, like, 85% of our business is done globally, so there has been years and years-, and, you know, with a lot of support from Invest Northern Ireland for product development, for, for different marketing schemes, but also for going on trade missions. Like, some of the trade missions you were talking about there earlier, like, I've gone to-, I've gone to Dubai, I've been to-, I've been to Brazil a couple of times on, on different Invest NI trade missions, and they've all-, they've all worked out well and helped us grow our business, so it's, it's much appreciated and I'm glad I could be here to share our story.

Moderator: It's great. And Con, I know that you've been, kind of, collecting air miles and wearing out a lot of shoe leather as usual in your business, and, and when we spoke the other night I think you were on your way back or on your way to Germany, so clearly the international outlook. I know that Kiverco's business is largely GB based and you've got a presence in Europe, but I believe you're looking to widen the, the, kind of, you're gonna widen the ambition now and you're, you're active in the Middle East. Tell us a little bit about that journey and how you were approaching the Middle East, actually, because compared to market just across the water it has to be very, very different in terms of how you, kind of, get there, how you operate.

M: Yeah, the Middle East is a very interesting market, to say the least. I mean, we have been there now, I think the first visit that one of the Kiverco guys did was back in 2013, so we dipped our toe in the water, we had a look at it and we didn't do anything, and, and that's okay. You can do that as well as an exporter, you can go to markets, do, do your homework, and come back and say, 'Maybe not just now.' But subsequently in 2015 and 2016 we actually sold our first waste recycling plants to the Middle East, so there clearly was an opportunity there, it just wasn't the right time for us in 2013. And sometimes as well, going to certain markets, it does take time. You know, if, if you're sitting here today thinking, 'Should I export?' it's not going to happen tomorrow, you've got to put the effort in, and that investment in time costs money, it also takes you away from potential other markets. So, you know, advice that I would give for, for any new exporter is, is spend time researching which markets suit your product or service best. The guys at Invest NI, again, I mean, I've, I've about twenty years now been exporting, and, and the help and the advice, and the guidance, just even the simple tips like, as Jackie said, you know, to, to, to understand the culture, the simple things, how to present your card to someone that you meet, is really important, and it can trip you up if you don't, you know, know these little tips. So, you have to-, you have to really spend time to understand that market and where you're headed. I suppose for Northern Ireland the easy thing to do is to look for the English-speaking markets, and that's fine to do that, but perhaps the biggest opportunity are in those markets that are, you know, slightly more difficult to converse with, but nonetheless there's, there's obviously support and ways to, to overcome them problems.

But the Middle East for us has, has, has really opened up now, we've, we've spent a lot of time. One of my sales team members, Gabriel, spends a lot of time obviously in the Middle East, talking to people in the Middle East, and we've been fortunate to, to recently win two very large orders in the Middle East, one of which is in the UAE, which we visited only three weeks ago with, again, the guys from Invest Northern Ireland and the Minister Alliance (ph 15.29) to announce that partnership. And we've also done business in Saudi Arabia, which, again, I know, Mark, you've spent some time living there so you understand the difficulties with trading with Saudi Arabia, but phenomenal opportunities, you know, great place to, to, to do business because there are serious opportunities. And for us in the waste recycling industry, now they're investing a lot of money in, in their waste sector, and they want to very quickly fast track their waste away from landfill and, and into projects. They have about six or seven giga projects which are multi-billion-dollar construction projects to, sort of, diversify their economy away from, from the reliance on oil and gas and, and more into tourism and, and the service sector, you know. So, yeah, it's, it's interesting, and as you say, the one thing you've got to do if you're wanting to export, particularly if you're a small business, is, is get the second passport. You're gonna need to, to, to travel a lot, and, and some of the places you go, you know, it's, it's, you know, maybe better to go on the-, on the British passport or, or the Irish passport, so I, I would give that advice to people as well, definitely have two passports.

Moderator: You make a very-, you, yo made a really interesting point earlier, and it, kind of, resonates with me as well. When a company's trying to grow into the export market, particularly a small company, and, you know, the typical Northern Ireland profile, an SME, often family owned and grown, and they hire some sales guy like you who says, 'It's not enough to stay here, I've got to get out to the Middle East, I've got to get out to Europe, I've got to get out to the States,' but as you said there's an investment there upfront, so how do you-, how do you, kind of, carry that internally? How do you-, how do you work through that, that mindset that says, you know, 'I need an instant return on in this three months or sixth months,' Con? How do you-, how do you, kind of, get past that?

M: Well, this is a tricky one, Mark, and I suppose for, for companies that, you know, have, like Kiverco, Aidan and Anne McKiver, it's a family owned business, it's a very strong business, GB is our main market still, and, you know, when you're-, when you're doing well as a business and, and, you know, a lot of people are contacting you for your product, you know, for, for someone like me to join, which I'm, I'm there over two years now, and, and have, say, spent lots and lots of time in the air and in other parts of the world, when you come in and you say, 'Listen, guys, I wanna, you know, take some of your hard-earned cash and, and go and start and visit all the markets and, and start to, to shift some of the focus away from GB to export,' it does take a number of conversations, there's no, no point in saying it doesn't. But they, they too have, have a vision, have a focus for growth, they wanna scale the business, and because it has worked so well in GB and has got such a strong reputation, you know, it, it's easy to understand it, you've just got to get that reputation, that understanding in other parts of the world. So, they've been very, very supportive, I must say, they've been, you know, thankfully listening to what we want to do, moving forward.

Moderator: I hope there's lots of business owners listening to that story, 'cause if you're-, if you're nervous about taking the step into the export market, you know, really these, kind of, these four guys hopefully will, will inspire you to do that. Can I ask you then just to, kind of, wrap a little bit here, maybe, Irene, just in terms of where you are now two years on in your journey? If you were talking to the Irene of two years ago, what would be your advice? And please don't say, 'Don't do it.' What would-, what would-, what would be the advice to Irene two years ago?

F: I think I probably would've told me to always, kind of, keep the strategy in mind and examine that, and I think, you know, very much you, kind of, need to ask yourself these questions at the start rather than now, you know, where am I going? You know, how am I gonna get there? Who do I need to help me with that? And how am I gonna do it? And that applied then, but more importantly it applies even still now when I'm at the export stage because I could make a mistake, I could go to the, you know, to a completely wrong territory, I could meet a partner that's wrong, you know, and you have to be really forensic with it, and analyse it in detail, and make really informed decisions, and almost test parts of your market too, you know, to see, well, what works and what doesn't without putting too much resource into it before you know for sure and you get that gut feeling that it's the right thing to do.

Moderator: Yeah, brilliant. And, and, Jackie, the same, I guess, you know, if you were talking to a colleague maybe in, in your industry, in financial services and software, who was maybe thinking about taking those steps into export, but doesn't have the experience that you guys have had, what would be your-, what would be your words of advice?

F: Well, I, I think you have to change your strategy depending on where you are, so for example, what we learned in the APAC region was they weren't going to do business with an SME from Northern Ireland that they'd never heard of, it was just too high risk, so actually we weren't gonna sell to the end client, we were going to have to go into a partnership with a prime contractor, a systems integrator like IBM, who would-, who would work with us, and we would provide part of a solution as opposed to the whole solution. So, I think you have to be open-minded about whether or not you're actually gonna do business directly with, with the clients. North America is different again, you know, and I think as soon as you have an Irish accent in North America you've got a leg up already, they, they love to hear us. And the other piece of advice I would give us, you know, exploit your assets, exploit your contacts, ask people for help, because people love giving you help, and people on our board, for example, have been there and done it, and there's a wealth of knowledge very often in, in our board members' heads that we don't tap, and I think having open conversations and actually exploiting the knowledge that sometimes sits within your own company is an important aspect of it too.

Moderator: Brilliant. And Mike, yeah, you're, your advice to would-be exporters?

M: Well, I, I was just gonna say, following on what you were saying there, Jackie, I, I was actually quite lucky when, when I took over the role for TruCorp, I had-, I had an awesome owner of the company who

was-, who was the MD, who was, like, 'Mike, do what you want, go here, go there,' you know. 'You have-, you have-, we have the money to spend, I don't wanna tell you what to do (audio cuts out 21.58) want you to tell me how you're gonna do it,' and so I was-, I was lucky that way. But what you were saying when you were leaning on other people for information, I made a couple of friends in our industry who were just, they're, they're great friends to this day, and I, kind of, piggybacked my strategy for how I wanted to set up distribution partnerships globally based off of their advice. It was like, 'Oh, there's this guy in Singapore, one of these guys are, you know, a joker, but this guy's actually legit. These, these guys over here in, you know, in different parts of the world-', they would-, they would tell me, you know. There were-, there were so many different people within the industry that, that had reputations, and I was lucky, so I found people who I could trust who gave me a lot of advice, and then-, and then within the US, like, I'm an American, so flying over to the US was just like, it was-, it was going home, and I would go to conferences in different markets around the US, and part of it was just going out and having a good time, and meeting people, and making good connections, and over a long period of time it's turned into a pretty successful business.

Moderator: So, final pearl of wisdom, Con, talking to companies that are maybe thinking about getting into the export market, starting to gear up, any final words of encouragement or wisdom?

M: I think, you know, you've got to identify which sales channel works best, and I know the guys have alluded to that, you know, you, you can go direct, you can use sales agents, you can find distribution channels. You know, for our business, actually, we work with all three, and again, what, what Jackie says, right, you've, you've got to adapt to the market you're, you're going to. Back to research, you've got to-, you've got to-, you know, spend the time before you move anywhere, 'cause it does cost so much in terms of your time invested to, to realise, actually, if I had researched that properly, I would never have went there. Leaning the guys in Invest North Ireland, you know, we have, you know, as a company got a fabulous relationship with them, they've got teams all around the world, you know, and, and they're just willing to help, and we have, you know, reached out for, for financial support, if it's R&D investment, we've also jumped in the trade missions, which are a brilliant way to get into the market, and, and, and they will set up meetings for you when you can go and start to explore and, and hear what, what a potential customer's got to say about your product, and, and that will form an opinion. So, I, I would say, you know, definitely get in contact with Invest Northern Ireland and use them.

Moderator: Great. Well, some fantastic experiences, guys, and I really appreciate you sharing, and I'm hoping that there's at least one person in the audience who was maybe thinking of getting into the export market now takes those first steps. And we can't finish-, I'll get shot if I don't mention export health checks again, export health checks, speak to Anne Beggs, she's sitting at the front, if you need your export health checked, that's Anne sitting at the front, don't miss out. So, thanks, guys, thanks a million, and thank you all for paying attention. Cheers.

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