

Butchers beef up their skills

Independent butchers in Ireland have been dealing with increasing change in their industry but the ACBI Skillnet has helped to develop a stronger focus on training and is fostering a culture of learning and shared business ideas in a traditionally conservative sector

The Associated Craft Butchers of Ireland (ACBI) Skillnet Retail Training Network brought together independent butchers throughout the country in an attempt to deliver much needed skills and networking advantages to a sector badly in need of development.

The ACBI Skillnet was formed after a merger of four representative butcher organisations in late 1999 and resulted in a total of 100 butchers participating in the Skillnet. The programme help combat the low prevalence of general business skills among member businesses and the lack of training participation in the industry. The experience of Skillnets also helped develop a strong networking community and an ability to share ideas in an industry that was traditionally highly conservative.

The food sector in general, and meat in particular, has undergone immense change in the past decade. The growth of convenience foods, concern over red meat consumption and food safety, together with the widening reach of supermarkets have had a serious detrimental impact on the local butcher, who has seen his market share decline substantially during the Nineties. Over that decade, approximately 600 butcher shops and over 60pc of the country's domestic abattoirs have shut down. Moreover, up until 1999, the sector could not find a united front to deal with these very substantial challenges.

ACBI Skillnet Network Co-ordinator John Molloy explains. "We had a number of amateur organisations in Ireland representing butchers on a fire-fighting basis. When a problem arose, they all ran to struggle with the problem but aside from that, there was absolutely no development at all in the sector. There was no training or there was no co-ordinated effort to upgrade the sector in any shape or form." Then, in 1999, four existing amateur organisations came together to form the Associated Craft Butchers of Ireland, the first such grouping to be founded on a professional footing.

By the nature of the sector, independent butchers in Ireland tended to be isolated from each other and from best practices in business methods, even though many were successful. "One of the difficulties in the industry was that there was nothing at all there in terms of training and even networking. Butchers weren't coming together and were protective about sharing information because they weren't used to networking. They didn't see the advantages of discussing their business, because they were fearful someone would steal their ideas."

Prior to the ACBI Skillnet, there was no culture of learning in the sector or no understanding of how training might impact on a trader's bottom line. Most of the training that did take place was informal as apprentices 'served their time' with a butcher. Consequently, there was a huge inconsistency in skill levels among butchers throughout the country.

To tackle the skills deficiencies in the trade, each of the training courses developed through funding from Skillnets covered three primary areas. These were then refined and broken down into modules.

The following represented the main structure of the ACBI Skillnet programme:

- 1) Business development
 - Business management
 - Business planning
 - Strategy development
 - Financial management
- 2) Marketing strategies
 - Market development
 - Promotional strategies
 - Excellent customer care
 - Retail selling
- 3) Presentation and display
 - Shop layout and design
 - Merchandising
 - Added-value products
 - Meat presentation and display



John Molloy, Network Co-ordinator, ACBI Skillnet

The training took the form of a series of workshops, seminars and demonstrations organised in seven locations throughout the country. The training generally took place in two-and-a-half hour sessions beginning at 7.30pm.

"The first thing we discovered was that after a long day's work participants in the training were nodding off or found it hard to keep their attention," says Molloy. "This was because some of members involved would start work at half seven in the morning, be straight out the door and might have to drive anything up to an hour to a training centre."

A summer break, together with an imposed lay off due to the foot and mouth crisis, allowed time for a rethink and when sessions resumed, the whole approach was changed. Problem-based learning now directed participants towards real-life situations. Challenges that arose in case studies were put to the group, with each member asked to bring their own unique perspective to bear on the problem.

Best practice

"By going through this approach in a non-threatening way, everybody is bringing their own best practice to the group, without actually realising it as their own best practice," he adds.

Due to the varying skill levels of the participants, flexibility was essential. Prior to setting up the networks, an extensive training needs analysis was conducted. In addition, however, at the beginning of each module, trainers conducted a mini training needs analysis in order to select the appropriate level at which to pitch that module.

"The first thing that happens when you train somebody is a change of attitude," says Molloy. Like many small businesses, sections of the independent butcher sector have been slow to embrace new business methods, but

newfound skills and the exchange of information between participants has allowed everyone to think more creatively about the very real business challenges that face the sector. Initial suspicions evaporated very quickly.

"What they found when they started coming together was all the things they were protecting were actually more valuable to share because the information you actually got in return made your own ideas or your own concepts either stronger or you threw them out the window. Usually you would say 'that's a great idea, do you mind if I use it?' This enabled the whole networking thing to take off."

As the culture of learning takes hold, training is no longer seen as a cost but as an investment. When staff were brought along through the process, they came to see their role more clearly within the business, and thus became more motivated and productive. "What we found is everything from people changing their cabinets to people changing their lighting, changing their shop fronts, changing their uniforms, changing their vans, signwriting their vans, more marketing, more holidays – they're actually confident to go away for a week and leave their business. I know a couple in the south west, it was their first holiday in 20 years."

The networking element of the process has been particularly successful in breaking down the isolation that characterised the sector. The once-weekly meetings have now sparked continuous informal contact between butchers, consolidated by regular ACBI trips and events. "Everybody has literally taken a step forward and again it's evident to the association here in the types of calls we're getting. Three years ago, it was, 'I've a problem, will you solve it?' Now we're getting calls, 'I've a problem, how can I solve it?'"

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Jeff Cleary, butcher

The Foodstore

When Niall Heffernan went to the bank to look for funding to renovate his business last year, he was greeted with a certain amount of scepticism. Not only had he renovated just four years previously, but he was also proposing to shut down what looked like a very successful coffee shop to concentrate instead on his fresh food business. A year later, he's down eight staff but turnover is up 25pc.

Five years ago, he left the premises he'd been renting for 10 years and bought a much larger one. The Foodstore was born, though it offered a great deal more than the name suggests: a deli counter, butchers and bakery as well as a coffee shop. Within a few years, he'd gone from a small two-man business to a 22-man operation, but despite

the obvious success of the store, Niall still felt he wasn't getting enough out of the 80 to 90 hours he was putting in every week. "My problem was I was so busy working, I was being a very busy butcher but I wasn't being a very good businessman."

He joined the north west network of the ACBI's Skillnet and went to Castlebar every Monday night where the participants and the trainers would go through modules covering everything from recruitment to finance. While he found both the training and the discussions it inevitably aroused very helpful, a more significant initiative was in the pipeline. Project manager John Molloy put together a specialised network consisting exclusively of butchers who also ran deli counters. It's been brilliant for me because what we basically did in the deli network, we sat down and looked at each other person's business and went through it very very critically, where they were strong, where they were weak, and we all learned areas that we could improve on, business-wise, planning-wise and structure-wise, and also if we weren't maybe taking as much out of the business as we should."

Open book

The network was run on an open-book basis, and as such everybody committed to total confidentiality. Because it was a nationwide network, no two participants were based close to one another, so there were no real competitive issues. As confidence grew in the group, they worked through a variety of detailed business problems. "We were all deli guys, everyone had different products but we would have had some products that were common to us, that we each produced ourselves. We each went away and did a breakdown on that product, how we produced it, what it cost, what staff time it took, and we all compared notes to see where we could change our process or maybe buy it in cheaper than we were producing it ourselves."

When Niall set out to revamp the shop on the basis of what he had learned, he relied heavily on individuals within the network who had already been through the experience of renovating while keeping the shop open. "I revamped the whole place, put it all into one, spent a lot of money on it and I'm getting a reward out of it now. Through the deli network, I not only met people who were like minded and positive thinkers but who had also done some of the stuff I had done. They had learned from their mistakes and I was able to see things differently and get the confidence to do things differently myself ... I'm much happier with the business, it's much more profitable and I'm getting a fantastic reaction from customers."



Charles Williams, butcher

Charles Williams, butcher

The fact that Charles Williams managed to make any time at all for mid west ACBI Skillnet is a clear indication of how valuable he found it. As a result of the Monday evening session, the Tipperary butcher had to get up two hours earlier than usual on Tuesday morning – 4am is early by anyone's standards.

Charles is the fourth generation of butchers in Cloughjordan. He still works in the same shop his great-grandfather started up back in 1867. Specialising in home-reared beef, Charles and his wife Sandra also run the farm which services the shop. Up until he participated in the Skillnet, the only training he had ever had consisted in learning the way his father cut meat. But since signing up with the ACBI network, the benefits have been twofold. The skills imparted by the trainers on the Monday night sessions helped him extend his knowledge of the business side of the industry, but most importantly, the experience of mixing with other butchers and seeing how things are being done elsewhere added great benefits.

"From talking to other butchers, co-operating with other butchers, listening to different methods, seeing other butcher's shops over the time with the Skillnet, we decided that it was time to renovate our shop and bring it up to modern standards."

The gold medals that he's won for butchering, together with the certificates since awarded to the staff are now all displayed on the wall of an airy modern premises, and customer reaction has been uniformly positive. "I would have met a lot of different butchers, from Clare and Limerick, and most of us would all have different types of businesses. We all ring one another and talk to one another ... If you wanted to ask a question, whether you were to charge €1.99 for a pork chop or €2, you have someone to chat it over with and give you a reason why for one or the other."

Since completing the course and participating in the network, his whole attitude to the business has changed. He feels that it has opened up his business horizons and a fresh approach to his business – "The experience has changed my whole mindset."