

Pets Warehouse

Kate Wood describes the creation and development of Pets Warehouse, a social firm committed to creating employment and training opportunities for people who are furthest from the labour market.



The idea to start the business came in July 2006. I had worked in Specialist Education Provision for 4 years and I was then managing two projects funded by the European Social Fund. The aims of the projects were to raise student's aspirations and to assist their skills in communication. It quickly became apparent that no student had any aspiration, or inspiration, to look for work. However, after the Project workers had worked with post 14 students for the duration of the projects 4 students have left and gone into some form of paid employment.

The success of the projects meant that we had identified 35 students who, with support, could find suitable employment in the open labour market. We put together a 3 year bid to the Big Lottery, to enable us to help this

group of disadvantaged young people. Unfortunately, we were not successful but I still had a desire to try to help.

Idea

My time in school had come to an end, so during the summer holiday of that year, I toyed with the idea of starting a business, mainly to offer training and work-experience opportunities to these young people. I went up north to visit my mother and took her out for the day to Skipton in North Yorkshire. I worked for a Pet Food Manufacturer in Skipton over 20 years ago, so I thought I would take the opportunity to see if Jeff, my old boss, was still around. Even though the town had changed, almost beyond recognition over the years, I found the factory and sure enough, Jeff was still at the helm

and we spent a fun hour or so of 'do you remember when'. It was when I was driving home that I hit on the idea of opening a Pet Store. I had done this previously in the North West of England and it had been successful.

During my time in school I came across San Leonard who is a Director of Social Firms Wales. I liked the idea of using the profits from the business to put back into the community, rather than our own bank accounts and there began my 3 year quest to make the dream a reality. A Social Firm is a business committed to creating employment and training opportunities for people who are furthest from the labour market. It is one form of Social Enterprise, and subscribes to the three values of Enterprise, Employment and Empowerment.

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Social Firms

Combining commercial orientation with a social mission, Social Firms offer a supportive work place for people who are traditionally discriminated against in terms of gaining employment, such as disabled people, people with mental health problems, ex-offenders or people recovering from substance misuse.

They are not segregated workplaces. Ideally, around 25-50% of the workforce will have some recognised disability or disadvantage, but it should be an environment of mixed ability, reflective of the society we live in. They are also real commercial businesses, aiming to generate at least 50% of their income through trading, with as little as possible dependency on government or grant subsidy.

A Social Firm should aim to empower individuals to be the best they can; to command equal pay, equal rights and to progress and improve themselves, whatever their background.

Directors

In order to become a registered company I needed some Directors, Ideally people who had commercial experience. I invited San Leonard to join me as she would help us deliver our social objectives and then, through friends, was eventually introduced to Graham Wilson, who had been a Director at the Admiral Insurance Company. Graham had retired early and two years after doing so, felt able to commit himself to our mission. I invited him to visit the school and introduced him to the Head Teacher, San, and other members of staff. Thankfully, Graham bought into what our aim was and agreed to join us! He is a huge part of our day to day running team! Our main funder, The Community Investment Fund, has always said that we need to strengthen our Board and this we knew, so I was then introduced to Andy Bird, who started life with The Principality. Andy is leading our replication. We have decided that replication, rather than franchise, is the way forward for us.

A social firm needs to succeed commercially in order to survive, so we understand how valuable the skills and expertise of our Directors are.

Funding

Because of the nature of our business, we were able to access a range funding pots. Initially the Community Investment fund granted us monies for a feasibility study and a business plan which then led us to successfully gain £100,000 from the Community Investment fund, managed by Mark White, for start-up costs as well as an £11,000 pre-marketing trading grant. The Waterloo Foundation also agreed to sponsor a salary over a 3 year period. As well as these monies, Gareth Bickerton, Awards Director for UnLtd, supported Kate with a level 1 and level 2 award. UnLtd is a charity which supports social entrepreneurs - people with vision, drive, commitment and passion who want to change the world for the better. They do this by providing a complete package of funding and support, to help these individuals make their ideas a reality.

Supported Employment

We had the opportunity to work with Elite Supported Employment Agency ELITE SEA is a voluntary organisation, which enables individuals with disabilities to access and maintain paid employment via a tested system of support and training. Our initial contact was with Andrea Wayman who is a Director and we explained that we had 102 retail hours available for people who wanted to either access employment or return to



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the open employment market. Andrea came into our store with some of her employment training co-ordinators, who assessed the tasks involved in retail working which would enable them to job match with their client base. Once Elite had identified possible applicants, these candidates completed an application form and then were invited to attend an interview. Our interview panel then selected a short list and invited 7 candidates to commence a 21 day Job trial whilst being supported by their Employment Training Co-ordinators. This proved to be an invaluable way of being able to assess the prospective employee's skills and it also enabled them to decide whether working for us would be a suitable option. We offered permanent contracts to the 7 candidates at the end of March and again, with the help of Elite SEA, we secured funding support towards some of the

salaries from Shaw Trust. We are very proud of our Crew members. They have achieved so much both professionally and personally during their time with us.

Whilst our crew is managed and supported by our Store manger, they very quickly became supportive of each other. This led to the Employment Training Coordinators being able to withdraw their support and collectively, the Crews' confidence began to exceed all of our expectations. This increased confidence and self-esteem has enabled some of our crew to extend their working hours, which was not necessarily on their personal agenda when they accepted our contract of employment.

During the time we have been trading, we have seen a small, but steady increase in business as well as continued staff development and product

knowledge. We now pride ourselves on offering excellent customer care and this is attributed to the professionalism our crew aspires too.

Training

An integral part of our business plan is to use the store as a vehicle to offer time-limited, accredited training to disadvantaged young people within the locality. We have connected with ACT, Wales's largest work based learning provider with established links throughout the country. ACT provides quality training opportunities to people aged 14 to 64, whether unemployed or working. Through our dedicated training centres ACT can teach you the skills wanted by employers, or work closely with you and your employer to meet your training requirements.

*Kate Wood
Managing Director*

Some quotes from the Crew:

"I feel like I've gained so much confidence since I started working here"

"It's a great place to work because we all get on so well and support each other"

"I enjoy working with the animals, it also gets me out of the house doing something meaningful"

"After a long time of unemployment due to illness, working at Your Pets Warehouse has led to a massive change in my lifestyle"

