



CLIENT FOCUS DIVERSIFYING AND SUPPORTING THE NATIONAL EFFORT

Pat Naughton, of Shadetech

WHILE MOST BUSINESSES ACROSS THE COUNTRY HAVE BEEN NEGATIVELY IMPACTED BY THE CURRENT PANDEMIC, SOME COMPANIES ARE ABLE TO DIVERSIFY AND NOT ONLY KEEP THEIR BUSINESS TICKING OVER BUT ARE ALSO SUPPORTING THE NATIONAL EFFORT.

SHADETECH in County Clare

Established in 2016, Shadetech in Shannon, Co Clare manufactures manual and automated blinds and screening systems for both residential and commercial markets. Exporting to over 200 companies in the UK every month, it received numerous supports from Local Enterprise Office Clare, including Business Priming and Expansion Grants, which have allowed them to employ more staff and purchase machinery to grow their business.

Since the start of the current crisis, it also received specific COVID-19 mentoring which company boss, Pat Naughton, says has been vital in helping them to make the decisions necessary to weather the current storm.

“At the start of the outbreak, we had to stop activity on the residential aspect of our business and drastically scale down our commercial offering, as homes and workplaces closed their doors around the country,” he says. “I was assigned a mentor from my Local Enterprise Office and having that sounding board for a second opinion, even if it was the same as my own, was great reassurance.

“So, I would highly recommend this to other companies as a means of getting through the crisis as, like most businesses, we were hit big time – with the residential side of our work stopping overnight. Frustratingly, we are still getting calls from people every day asking us to come and fit blinds in their homes but of course, we are unable to do that due to social distancing restrictions.

“Our commercial projects make up 85% of our business and even though we have had contracts ready to go, when France and Belgium closed down, our supply chains were severely affected, so we were unable to go ahead”. But despite these setbacks, Naughton has undertaken new work for the health sector and hopes to have the full team back at work before long.

“Just before the lockdown, we were contacted by a local contractor,” he says. “They said they were doing emergency hospital work and asked us to get in some stock ‘just in case’. We knew what might be needed and what would be compliant – so when they contacted us to say they needed blinds and hospital cubicle tracks, we were able to do this – using half our team to manufacture it and the other half to install it.

“That worked well and we are now installing blinds in an emergency HSE house in Ennis.”

Getting through the current crisis unscathed isn’t easy, but the businessman says staying positive, ‘thinking outside the box’ and communicating with staff and clients is crucial.

“We haven’t done anything major with regard to adapting to the crisis apart from a little bit of upskilling and a small investment in some new equipment,” he says.

“But I really believe that communication is key with staff and clients as people need to know that you are doing your best.”

www.shadetech.ie



BENSONS WORKWEAR in South Cork

Established in 2012 by fashion designer Beni Moussa, Cork-based clothing manufacturer, Bensons Workwear, has been designing and creating sportswear, uniforms, fire retardant clothing and fashionwear since its inception. And after the outbreak of Covid-19, the company, which benefited from a Trading Online Voucher, and Business Continuity Voucher from Local Enterprise Office South Cork, halted production of their regular stock and instead focused all their efforts on making PPE (Personal Protective Equipment).

“Covid-19 slowed our production and fabric sourcing from December 2019, so we decided to stop what we were doing and put all our efforts into making hospital gowns,” says Moussa, who is originally from Algeria. “We didn’t have to pivot too much to make the necessary changes in production capacity or for the upskilling of staff apart from buying some new machines and working more closely as a team in order to get maximum efficiency.

“We wanted to do our bit for those who are saving lives as they are the most important members of society right now. So, we have staff covering two shifts, in order to offer flexitime, and are currently producing a gown every three minutes, so that’s quite an achievement for us.”

Having sourced large amounts of fabric from Irish suppliers, Bensons, which have already received a TAME grant (Technical Assistance for Micro Exporters) and a Business Expansion Grant, have already delivered the first batch of medical grade garments to the front line and will continue to do so for as long as is necessary.



And in addition to all staff retaining their jobs, the company is also looking for others to join the ranks to help produce the much-needed PPE. “Everyone is working full time, but on flexible hours as evening suits some people better, and we are currently advertising for more seamstresses to join us.

“I believe we will continue to make hospital gowns after the pandemic is over as our plan is to always have a project which will serve the community. My other objective would be to reignite the textile industry in Ireland – when you look back at the history of this country, there were a great many people who were skilled in this area and much of this seems to be lost. So if we can do our bit to bring it back to life, that would be a fantastic thing. And after the pandemic our factory will serve to teach textile skills in order to have more garments made in Ireland.”

Moussa, whose company is based in Midleton, Co Cork, is encouraging other companies affected by the pandemic, to speak to their Local Enterprise Office for advice and to try and think of ways in which they can adapt their product.

“It’s easy to think there are no other options available, but I believe there is always an alternative route so it’s really crucial to keep asking yourself what your options are,” he advises.

“But this crisis will end, so it’s also very important for people feeling the stress of it all, to look after themselves, keep positive, do some exercise and be mindful of the effect that this may have on their morale.”

bensonsworkwear.com

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