

A PASSION FOR THE FIELD

Strong relationships with customers and connecting with other SMEs are two of the main drivers of mobile work-management software firm Forcelink's success as a start-up



Paul Ryan, co-founder and director of software start-up Forcelink, says he has never come across an obstacle yet that somebody else has not come across and succeeded in getting through.

"Not being part of a large corporate and taking on a new journey as a relatively small company can be lonely. Simply putting the word out that you need help on something – as well as offering help – helps to minimise challenges," he says.

Forcelink supplies mobile work-management software to companies that have people deployed in the field such as sales teams, maintenance or emergency-service management teams.

Customers include facilities-management companies, information-technology services companies and electricity-network management companies.

"The company grew out of the experience of the founders, all of whom had been involved in the delivery of complex software and technology solutions to large customers around the world, and all at high cost," explains Ryan.

"The idea was to produce sophisticated solutions at low cost to enable companies save money by controlling their work management efficiently and improving their customer service, using new mobile and internet technologies."

With Forcelink's order management solution, users log onto their mobile devices to carry out a range of functions such as taking orders, invoice generation, reporting back on progress and resource tracking.

"Forcelink provides a really strong return-on-investment case for small companies with between five and 500 resources deployed in the field – the solution leads to more efficient time management, more work, better customer service, better use of company assets and quality control," says Ryan.

Forcelink offers a win-win situation for its clients. "If it can't be proved to deliver savings, they can simply turn it off! We offer the first month free of charge, so no customer pays until they're happy."

'The whole range of conversations on the site about sales and companies sharing sales teams has informed some product roadmap decisions'

THE MARKETING PUSH

Regarding marketing activities, to date Forcelink has used existing contacts – all of its customers are from old relationships from the founders' previous lives.

"When you're passionate about the product you sell and provide customers with the ultimate guarantee [turn it off if it's not working], your customers become your greatest supporters. We have found that our partners have become our customers and our customers have become our partners."

The Ulster Bank initiative Smallbusinesscan has proved invaluable in terms of giving the company access to the wider small to medium-sized enterprise (SME) market in Ireland, says Ryan.

"Just by reading the site every day, we see the issues being faced by SMEs – pressures on costs, holding onto staff, holding onto existing customers, finding new markets."

"The whole range of conversations on the site about

sales and companies sharing sales teams has informed some product roadmap decisions, such as the upgrade to functionality on the salesforce side."

Forcelink intends to look at using online marketing, links to complementary sites and blogging to supplement the traditional activities such as trade shows, networking and meeting distributors face to face. "We have some great partners with marketing reach such as GamePlan in the UK and EON in South Africa."

The business has been self-financing from day one, says Ryan. "We were offered investment finance by a tier one investment house, which we declined. However, as we increase sales we will continue to invest in the business and add the new services and modules that our customers want."

"We will grow this business in Ireland and abroad – all the big analyst practices agree that a move to smarter mobile-work management is gathering major momentum as companies want to control costs and improve productivity."

While the firm hasn't needed financial support to date, Ryan acknowledges the importance of other types of support. "Because of our corporate backgrounds, we have all been helped greatly through further training. But we must also acknowledge Enterprise Ireland, the County and City Enterprise Boards, Smallbusinesscan and Ulster Bank for the amount of resources they make available for companies who no longer have the corporate set-up to support them."

The Forcelink team, based in Ireland and South Africa, have all worked with large corporate such as Siemens, SAP, Deloitte and IBM and collectively have decades of experience working on large work-management and field-force projects.

"While we worked on large deployments, our end customer invariably would be the team on the ground that were using the software to make their day more efficient in terms of scheduling work, making appointments, resolving maintenance problems or emergencies and reporting back to head office," says Ryan.