

Faces of the Company: Virginie Robinson

"I was a dreamer at school...something of a romantic," Virginie Robinson confesses, "but when those days drew to a close, I knew I had to leave, both home and France, if I wanted to really improve my English."

Smiling, Virginie recalls her home, Bourg-en-Bresse, as a town lost somewhere between Lyons and Geneva. And ever so deftly, she traces her twenty-four year history since leaving, with a tacit understanding of the inevitability of her choices.

Coming to Ireland to tackle English was almost preordained. She agreed to take an au-pair post as her first immersion into the language. It proved to be the staging post in a series that would see her inhabit myriad roles, all of which would develop her communication skills.

Innately orientated to a hands-on approach, Virginie adapted and blended into her new environment very quickly. Even though it was a period of no little trepidation and uncertainty, she astutely acquired her bearings and settled down.

"English was my mission. And the first six months were truly a struggle," she remembers, "it was tough but I enjoyed it – trying to make sense of daily life with my Irish family. All told, to be comfortable speaking English, probably took a year."

Unsure then of where her adventure would take her, but equipped with a personable nature, Virginie kept English in her sights. And not very far into her foreign adventure, she found her other half. She

also landed another job, which paid better and allowed her to express more of who she was.

From restaurants to sales to advertising to all-round communications specialist, Virginie has become integral to the internal organisational structure of Interconnection. She has advanced swiftly within the company: since last autumn, she has combined secretarial and liaison duties, with remarkable ease.

"Once I got used to working with computers everyday, everything else fell into place. I like taking care of students and solving problems... and acquiring new skills as I go," she says, as if one simply tumbles into the next. But that's her style of gaining momentum; and that's where Interconnection benefits.

Virginie has maintained very close ties with France – to allow her three children, Jeffrey, Ethan and Lily-Marie know of the provenance of their family. The hankering to return to the country of her childhood, which marked her early years, niggles no longer.

"I love the humanity of the Irish; the sense of welcome that I experience; the open-mindedness..." she says, identifying traits we ordinarily overlook. She also knows what she wants for her family.

Her daughter is all of six years of age. Happily conversant in French and English, she's moved onto Irish. Following in her mother's footsteps, Lily-Marie is part of a shared next generation. And possibly Interconnection's youngest asset is waiting.



Virginie Robinson

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Welcome to Interconnection for Business

Established in 2002, Interconnection is a Cork based Franco-Irish company which offers a range of services to Irish businesses.

Trade Missions

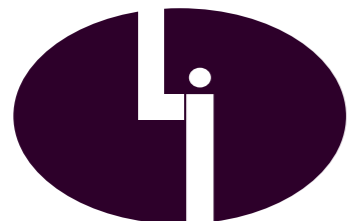
Looking to expand into the French marketplace? Searching for new business partners and suppliers in France? We can help.

A Trade mission is a 5-day fully accompanied trip to France, during which we introduce you to a number of potential clients and business partners.

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Use Interconnection for
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Dear Readers,

At last, the sun shines.

The year is well underway but spring is still struggling to assert itself - perhaps an allegory of where many businesses find themselves today.

In this edition, you will encounter Richard O'Brien and Sam Rathling, both of whom demonstrate the courage of their convictions by following principles of positivity and redefining the art of networking.

Both continue to be integral to the Cork business community, and notably beyond these borders. Their mindset pervades this newsletter: the sheer necessity to involve ourselves in much wider networks and thereby use resources right under our noses, such as internships.

Hélène Duquin, Director of Alliance Française Cork, provides the Expert Input on the significance of a more global approach to life. She explains the importance of Europe from a different vantage point to what we've grown accustomed.

You will cross paths with Cédric Lamartinière and Virginie Robinson. More than a year ago, Cédric availed of an Interconnection internship. Today he still works with us while pursuing further studies.

Virginie is the Face of the Company this time. Her story exemplifies the ethos of Interconnection, and how integral people can become to any enterprise in a short period of time.

Enjoy the read.

Natacha Nowack,
Editor



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STEERING AN EVEN KEEL

Richard O'Brien's handshake is as firm as his faith in embracing a positive outlook. Acknowledging the turbulence of the past year, he envisages a very different Ireland in the future. "People are entitled to feel aggrieved with what happened. But we have to move on. NAMA may not be the best show in town but it's better than nothing."

2009 took few prisoners: businesses downsized and contracted as much as they could to survive. But the inevitable arrived for many a venture – wiping out swathes of enterprises, regardless of size. Richard salutes those who've had the wherewithal to bounce back. The doors to emigration are not open as they once were.

"Without the choice to uproot and relocate we've had to make the most of where we are and what we've got. In the long term, it will be to our benefit. Grinning and bearing it now, we'll reaffirm our faith in our values," he says.

"We had lost the run of ourselves," he states, "to the point where we were losing our identity. From here, we have a fresh opportunity to return to what we're good at. The Celtic myth – there was no tiger – has taught us a lesson in humility."

"There's resilience out there in the business community that has yet to be fully picked up on. Steadily, we're getting back to our core principles: family, community and country," says O'Brien.

There is more than rhetoric to Richard. Last year, he established a business network for like-minded individuals. Born of the recession, his 'Goodbiz' brainchild was dreamt of as a means of bringing together those who shared the same ideals of corporate governance.

"It was a venture that had an eye on the medium to long-term, more so than a quick fix solution; bringing people with shared ideals closer together," he explains, "simply connecting people who could rely on each other."

Richard believes it will be some time before we render the good ship Ireland onto an altogether even keel. But he remains defiantly



Richard O'Brien: Managing Partner of KJ O'Brien & Co. Registered Auditors and Accountants, and CEO of Goodbiz Business Association Ltd.)

sanguine about our prospects, most notably when he promulgates the direction we ought to adopt.

"Export is essential, and so too the so-called 'smart economy'. We need to become a location for internationally traded services...working with corporations all over the world." Richard realises the potential of turning the culture key, and how this is a forte we've yet to confidently brandish.

The recent government ministerial appointments, flagging innovation and culture, hearten Richard; yet you sense he contains a controlled urgency that is greater than that which you would find within many of the state's monolithic structures.

"The service Interconnection provides is a genuinely valuable resource for Irish businesses. Interconnection proffers an opportunity that more could avail of – trainee-staff who can handle the routine tasks many companies are just not getting around to."

In O'Brien's book, the sooner we can return to the competitiveness of a decade ago, when we were the envy of Europe, the better. For a man whose professional practice is always in training mode, he appreciates the irony that Europe may very well be the resource that assists in "getting our house in order".

A Very French Connection

'Paris in the spring' – it has an immediate but almost irreducible cachet. Applying the idiom to the ineluctable but oft dismissed charm our French counterparts experience here is the challenge I set my interviewees: to unravel the 'je ne sais quoi' factor that first drew them (and keeps them connected) to Irish shores.



Cédric Lamartinière
Student at Cork College of Commerce

A little over a year ago, Cédric Lamartinière came to Ireland on a three-month 'work placement'. Joining 'Shared Visions' in the Rubicon Centre, on the campus of Cork Institute of Technology (CIT), he parachuted into the fast-paced marketing environment of an established international communications provider.

"The manager gave me a lot of responsibility to organise meetings and create promotional materials. It was new and fresh and I loved it," says Cédric. "To be part of such a set-up was so enjoyable, learning hands-on about slogans and reaching customers."

Once back in France, he determined Ireland to be the destination to continue his studies. "Despite the recession, Cork is still a dynamic place. That's what I really like. To be in a place where things are happening," he explains.

Even though only in his early twenties, Cédric has already had the experience of living abroad.

Leading a South West Pacific childhood existence for three years in New Caledonia

opened his eyes to just how varied the world can be.

"I loved Ireland from the moment I came here – it was distinctive yet it had a familiarity about it," he says, "it reminds me of my home in Brittany." Unprompted, Cédric draws parallels between the two: "I was comfortable here from the start; made friends; started projects."

Currently enrolled on a Computer and Business course in Cork College of Commerce, he envisages embarking on a three-year Marketing degree in CIT. "Ireland's scholarly reputation gave me a reason to study here. And the learning is much more practical than in France," he says.

Unfazed by academic challenges, Cédric still involves himself in event management for Interconnection, and also works weekends in a clothes shop in the city centre. "I have learnt to work in a team and also how to be a seller...in English of course," he points out.

Cédric knows that his time here has influenced him in the choices that will make a difference in his life – and he is comfortable in that knowledge.

If he could offer any advice to those who are considering his bold moves, it would be: "It's not that hard...just take the opportunity to learn about a new culture and adopt a new language. It's a most interesting thing to do."

Expert Input: Hélène Duquin

"We are the products of all our experiences, all our journeys..." says Héléne Duquin. As she speaks, you draw closer to gather the insights of a much-travelled diplomat. Glued to her words, her candour envelops and calms you.

Of French-Swiss origin, she is a passionate European yet her presence emanates utter composure and control. Perhaps they are traits inherited from her customs officer father. His thoughts on the futility of borders certainly informed his daughter and her path in life.

However, what really shaped Héléne was her passion for history. When only 14 years old, she won a national competition for delving into what occurred during the 'Resistance' period. What she unearthed has stayed with her since.

"Europe's warring legacy is still in our flesh and bones. I feel strongly about this...it made me want to become a peacemaker," she says, "as a teen, to encounter those who had been held in places like Dachau taught me a lot."

Schooled in literature and philosophy, and a subsequent student of political science, she specialised in understanding Europe. It has left her acutely aware of the myopia of nationalism and a determined believer in the importance of being part of a wider, more international community.

Cork's year as a 'Capital of Culture' signalled an opportunity for Héléne at the City's Alliance Française, and she seized it. "I feel at home here..." she says, unsure how to frame her uncanny feeling of belonging.

Héléne grew up in a Catholic heartland community in France, and that sense of kinship has followed her. "I feel close to Irish people,"



Director of Alliance Française Cork

she explains "it's hard to explain. There are so many echoes of France here, symbols of Lourdes, which is...of my country's soil."

"We've got a common patrimony. We share common roots which culturally engulf us," she says, eloquently sketching the lines of commonality that help blur the differences. All of which offers theories on how she has settled so seamlessly here.

There is another one though. Shortly after alighting in Cork, while making her enquiries as to whom she ought to make herself known, a certain Ms Nowak surfaced. And instantly a friendship was formed.

"I fell under her spell. Natacha's got a softness and a kindness that disengages you. She reaches out to people without labelling them," Héléne explains.

"Her company Interconnection reflects her sense of entrepreneurship. It's an environment where staff and students alike blossom," Helene immediately offers.

"I have huge admiration for her and what she does. It takes courage and energy and drive."

When Duquin communicates, she commands your full attention. She keenly holds your gaze but does so to connect not to lecture. As a consummate communications specialist, she disarms her interviewer with her ready sensibility.

"Europe is key to all our futures," she articulates, "a strong Europe bodes well for us all." Even the stoniest of Euro-sceptics would hesitate when presented with her tact and knack for agreeing with an interlocutor. In Duquin's book there is a reciprocal relationship to be fostered.

She sees a borderless world where companies can act as conduits to greater movement and freedom of choice. Equality is one of her cornerstone beliefs.

A mum of four young boys, she has always kept an eye on the horizon. Before Cork, there were placements in Bahrain, Lebanon and Switzerland.

Instead of fearing change, Helene allows herself the abandon of embracing the vicissitudes of her life. Some might say hers is the life of a chameleon, blending into new environments.

The opposite could not be closer to the truth. In time, she will be deployed elsewhere.

But for now, we can appreciate her here.

Changing Your Point of View



Sam Rathling: Founder & Manager of Expect Talent

"I had no idea what I wanted to do when I left school but I listened to my father's advice of getting work experience," says Sam Rathling, a self-made, prodigious global recruitment specialist.

Agreeing to a marketing internship changed everything. Inside a fortnight, she had a fulltime post, and in little more than a year she was managing accounts worth millions.

Sam's philosophy - "work you socks off" - still stands today. That and her innate ability to adapt to the natural flux of the marketplace

have seen her recruitment company grow exponentially, with no sign of slowing down.

However, after five years in Ireland, Sam has given up on entertaining the media. "It's so negative. It has the country talking itself into something worse than it is," she says, more than a touch frustrated with the sway the fourth estate holds over people.

"People need encouragement. Small business models are the future for many who do not want to be reliant on someone else for an income," she explains. "It should be all about

start-ups and providing them with support."

The attitude of the woman at the helm can be credited for the agency's success: Sam believes in "putting yourself into contention and networking".

And so, Expect Talent prides its freakish progress on the power of 'word of mouth'.

Sam surrounds herself with positive people. "I always look for the creative...the innovative types," she says. Rathling's hallmark is looking for 'the' new angle.

When companies cut their recruitment agency budgets, she stepped in and taught

them how to use recruitment tools for themselves.

Soon afterwards, many came back to her and asked her to do it for them. "It's not as easy as it first appears. Availing of social media is more time consuming and demanding than you'd think," she says.

"Agencies have to be proactive. Instead of waiting for the phone to ring, you've got to get out there and get known."

When I started out in Cork in 2005, I couldn't afford an administrator. Interconnection provided me with an intern," she recalls, "and it made a huge difference.

"It worked out so well that the intern became my first employee, and stayed with us for two years before realising her own ambition of becoming a PA for L'Oréal in Switzerland."

The ironic evolution of an intern's skills mirroring the development of a business should not be lost on enterprises in need of ready resources.

Ms Rathling advises we pay heed – "...before you know it, you might not be able to do without such staff."

