



The 8 things you always wanted to know about social entrepreneurs but were afraid to ask!

1. What is a Social Entrepreneur?

A social entrepreneur is someone who takes the spirit, energy and drive we see in successful entrepreneurs and rather than building profitable businesses uses these talents to build better communities. They look at the world, are unhappy with what they see, and resolve to change it. They are passionate, ambitious, resilient and focused and they excel at creating new and powerful solutions to the many social and environmental challenges we face. They measure their success not by making a profit but by making a difference.

2. What do Social Entrepreneurs do?

In the same way that business entrepreneurs develop companies that manufacture products or services and generate profits social entrepreneurs create and run organisations that provide products and services to generate social and environmental return. These might be small organisations designed to respond to a specific need at local level or they might be a larger scale organisations which address a social or environmental need on a national scale.

For example, Gerry Callaghan, a resident of Athlone, wanted to support the refugee and asylum seekers who were being accommodated in the town. He saw that they needed information and advice on issues such as asylum application process, housing, employment, health, family reunification and access to training. Gerry helped setup the New Horizon programme which provides this much needed support and helps integrate these new members into the wider community in Athlone.

Carmel Dunne is an example of a social entrepreneur who is looking to address an issue on a national scale. Carmel set up the CEOL Project in 1999 in order to bring music back into class every week for every single primary school child in Ballyfermot. Given the tremendous impact this has had in Ballyfermot and the real difference it has made to young children's lives, not only in their musical ability but their increased interest in school in general, Carmel is now rolling out her model to other schools and regions throughout the country and she aims over the next eight years to target all children at all primary levels in Ireland.

3. Are Social Entrepreneurs people who set up and run charities? Or do they set up and run businesses?

Some social entrepreneurs may set up and run charities. Others may set up and run businesses. It really depends on what they want to achieve and how they go about achieving it.

For example, Paul Mooney setup his organisation, Jobcare, as a charity. Jobcare works with people who for whatever reason are out of the workplace such as the long term unemployed and ex offenders, and helps them get over any obstacles between themselves and appropriate work. These services are provided free of charge. Given the Jobcare model the most appropriate setup for the organisation was as a charity.

Alternatively, Tara Cunningham setup Release Communication Intervention as a business. Release works with children suffering from speech and language difficulties, such as those with autism or down syndrome. In order to be able to provide its services Release decided to charge parents for speech therapy. However, by adopting a group therapy approach to speech therapy Release significantly reduced the cost of its programmes for parents, making its services accessible to families that previously could not afford speech therapy for their children. Given the Release model it made sense to run the organisation as a business with profits generated by the business being used to further enhance the service.

At first glance, social entrepreneurs who set up their projects as businesses or charities might seem to be adopting two very different approaches. However, there is a common thread that links them. In all cases they are driven by their overwhelming need to do something about the issue that concerns them. This remains their top priority in everything that they do. They simply chose whatever approach will be most effective in making their project a success, whether it be business or charity model.

4. So are people working in charities, or as volunteers and community activists social entrepreneurs?

Some are, but just because someone works in a charity or is a volunteer or a community activist doesn't automatically make them a social entrepreneur. Think of a business. Lots of people work in a business but that doesn't necessarily make them all entrepreneurs. Equally, that doesn't make their contribution any less valuable.

Any successful organisation, whether it be a business or a charity, needs a range of people to get involved, each of whom brings different strengths, skills and talents to the table. The entrepreneur is just one element of the overall fabric of the organisation, albeit a very important element. The entrepreneur brings the energy, drive and passion around which others coalesce. A key characteristic of any entrepreneur is that they think outside the box and come up with new and often surprising solutions to problems. So, whereas people working in charities, volunteers and community activists make a hugely valuable contribution to society, the distinguishing characteristic of a social entrepreneur is their ability to develop highly innovative solutions to the entrenched social and environmental problems we face.

5. Do Social Entrepreneurs get paid?

Yes, when they can afford it - after all many of them have been working full time on their projects for many years. Like many businesses starting up social entrepreneurs often work without pay to get their projects off the ground and will only get paid once the project is up and running. The reality is that for most social entrepreneurs their number one concern is make sure that their project survives and grows and if there is anything left it is normally ploughed back into the 'business'. And for social entrepreneurs getting to a point where they get paid is never easy as raising money and getting financial support is a constant challenge.

6. Where do Social Entrepreneurs come from?

From all walks of life. They are passionate people, people who won't accept the status quo in our society; they see things that need changing and they do something about it. Social entrepreneurs work at all levels, changing neighbourhoods, villages, towns, regions and society as a whole. They understand about taking risks and failing and bouncing back and starting again. They are success driven people.

7. Can you do an educational course to become a Social Entrepreneur?

While it can be argued that you can't teach someone to be passionate or to be a visionary or to have those unique qualities that make you an entrepreneur, there are practical skills and knowledge that can be learnt that help entrepreneurs successfully grow their project. These might include areas such as strategic planning, marketing and communication and financing and accounting and they are as applicable to social entrepreneurs as they are to their business counterparts.

Over the years courses such as MBAs have been developed for business entrepreneurs to address this need. Recently, many of these MBA courses have been opened to social entrepreneurs as well and a number of leading international institutions have developed undergraduate and post graduate courses specifically in the area of social entrepreneurship, universities such as Oxford, Stanford and Harvard. In Ireland, Trinity College Dublin, in partnership with Social Entrepreneurs Ireland, has taken the lead in launching an Initiative on Social Entrepreneurship within its School of Business.

In addition, organisations like Social Entrepreneurs Ireland are taking the lead in identifying, investing in and supporting the next generation of social entrepreneurs and the projects they are developing. Over the last 4 years SEI has selected 116 leading Irish social entrepreneurs, true innovators who are passionate about changing their communities for the better. They are now being supported in a whole variety of ways including financially, networking and in further education and training.

So the bottom line is that although you can't do a course to become a social entrepreneur (you either have the passion and vision or you don't), as a social entrepreneur you can take one of the growing number of courses in third level institutions such as Trinity College or connect with organisations like Social Entrepreneurs Ireland that provide support, education and training and help you and your project becoming effective.

8. Who are Social Entrepreneurs Ireland?

Social Entrepreneurs Ireland are a charitable organisation that aims to encourage and support the development of a new generation of social entrepreneurs. We directly support the early stage development of these social entrepreneurs by providing a range of supports that include financial investment, technical training, peer networking, mentoring and links to other social entrepreneur networks. We also work actively with the business, third level, public and voluntary sectors to support the development of a new social entrepreneurship movement in Ireland. Over the last three years we have invested over €2,800,000 in 116 Irish social entrepreneurs.

If people wanted to help out, what could they do?

There are lots of ways to help. Some people provide financial support, others provide their expertise by supporting Social Entrepreneurs Ireland directly or by supporting one of the many projects and programmes that have received a Social Entrepreneurs Ireland Award.