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Innovative disaster expert puts smart technology to the test.

Everyone will remember the devastating images of the Asian Tsunami which filled television screens and newspapers well into the New Year. The scale of the disaster meant it was vital for experienced logistics managers to coordinate the relief operation. One such disaster management expert was Enniskillen woman Olivia Cosgrove, who used innovative computer software - developed with R&D assistance from Invest Northern Ireland – to deal with the aftermath.

“I spent two months in Banda Aceh, the Indonesian city closest to the Indian Ocean epicentre of the earthquake,” says Olivia. “Essentially we had to try to bring normality back to an area larger than Ireland which was only accessible by air because the basic infrastructure - roads, ports and housing - had been washed away. It’s difficult to describe the totality of the devastation and the overwhelming loss of life.”

Olivia has worked alongside global aid agencies in war torn areas and natural disaster sites, including Rwanda, Kosovo and Afghanistan, for more than ten years. With a chartered accountancy background, she has long recognised the value of a simple but effective method of budgeting in disaster situations.

“In an emergency situation where aid is flooding into a region, it is crucial to manage the process so that money, emergency packs and water can be distributed more quickly. A lot of time is spent budgeting or reporting back to donors and I realised that organisations needed to make the process much faster and simpler.”

Olivia took the unusual step of researching the best method of achieving this during actual emergency situations so she could accurately reflect the needs of aid workers. Confident that her innovative financial planning software could help NGO’s improve budgeting skills, Olivia turned to Invest Northern Ireland for help.

“From day one, Invest NI was hugely supportive,” she says. “My client executive assisted me with pre-start funding and partnered me with a mentor who helped me with the technology aspects of the project and who introduced me to key support programmes such as SMART which could assist with R&D.”

Olivia piloted her idea in Uganda, using that experience to develop a project idea which she submitted for an Invest NI SMART Award. In September 2004, Olivia became one of only twenty-two individuals and companies from across Northern Ireland to win SMART funding that was acknowledged at an awards ceremony earlier this year.

“The SMART Award has meant so much to me,” she says. “It has given me the financial means to determine how commercially and technically viable my project is at a much earlier stage. More importantly, it has given me confidence in my project and in my own abilities.”

For Olivia, the future holds many opportunities. Two months after her return from Indonesia where she tested her prototype, Olivia – who is currently employed by the cross border group ICBAN – has presented her system to global aid agencies. Save the Children, the Catholic Relief Service and the Federation of The Red Cross have expressed interest and she has received positive feedback from EU officials on her work.

“With Invest NI’s assistance I’m now developing broader business skills including sales and marketing techniques so I can take my project to the next stage. The level of support and enthusiasm from the Invest NI team has been really refreshing and it’s reassuring to know that anytime I need impartial advice someone is there to help.”

SMART Award outline

- The SMART award scheme aims to help small businesses develop new products and processes to improve their competitiveness.
- The programme supports individuals and small firms to carry out technical and commercial feasibility studies over a 6-18 month period.
- The awards are set at 75 per cent on the first £60,000 of eligible costs up to a maximum level of £45,000. One third is paid immediately to the winners and the remainder is normally paid quarterly against claims submitted.
- Around 180 awards are made in the UK annually.
- For smaller projects, the SMART Micro programme offers grant assistance of up to £10,000 to help fund the development of low-cost prototypes of products or processes which involve technical advance and/or novelty.

Eligibility

Companies or individuals are eligible to compete for a SMART Award if they are resident in Northern Ireland and intend to start a business here if they win an Award. Existing business operating in Northern Ireland can compete if they have 50 employees or fewer.

Further information on eligibility and the SMART Awards is available at <http://www.investni.com/develop> or by contacting paul.malcomson@investni.com

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