

# BUSINESS READY

## UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK SCIENCE PARK

### Business Ready relieves IT support company of growing pains

After several years of sustained growth, Leamington-based Emerald Group had reached a crossroad. Further expansion of the company, which provides computer support and services, risked piling more pressure on founders Sarah and Darren Windrum's already busy schedules. They also needed to consider whether growth was in the best interest for the company.



Pictured (left to right): Darren Windrum & Sarah Windrum (Emerald Group) with Ian McFarlane-Toms (Business Ready)

This dilemma – to grow or not to grow – prompted Sarah and Darren to turn to Business Ready. Managed by the business support team at the University of Warwick Science Park, Business Ready has been delivering business growth and support services since 2017.

Since receiving expert guidance from Business Ready, Emerald Group has developed its marketing and customer services skills base. This has enabled them to expand their business at a manageable rate.

#### The Company

Founded by Sarah and Darren Windrum, Emerald Group is predicated on using technology as a force for good. The company works with start-ups and multi-national corporations in the West Midlands, providing computer support and services.

Emerald Group began life in a spare bedroom as an IT support business in 2009 before moving to its first official premises a year later. The company relocated to its purpose-built head office in 2015.

Following a sustained period of growth, which saw the company expand its team to 15 people, Emerald Group was faced with a decision to make: was it in the company's interest to continue to grow? While growth was a good signal of the company's direction of travel, it was also an indication of the increasing demands being placed on both Sarah and Darren.

#### The Challenge

Emerald Group had two things to consider. Firstly, did the company have the capacity for further growth? Secondly, and perhaps most crucially, was there an appetite for growth? Only by addressing these two questions were they able to establish whether further expansion would be sustainable.

Another challenge lay in the nature of the business. Emerald Group primarily operates as a services rather than goods company. Therefore, it was vital that the company was able to hire the right people – sufficiently skilled and who also reflected the values of the company.

#### The Solution

Having sought expert advice from Business Ready, Emerald Group began with general workshops – one on sales and another on risk management.

While these workshops were a useful introduction for the company's team members, both Sarah and Darren were keen to focus on skills more tailored to Emerald Group's needs.

Ian McFarlane-Toms, Business Ready Programme Manager at the University of Warwick Science Park, said "The workshop programme we offer gives SME business owners the chance to learn something about the particular business discipline they are interested in. But all businesses are different.

"In some cases, the generic overview is enough, but for most the opportunity to work more closely with a subject matter expert, on a customised programme, delivers best results".

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The company was assigned a Business Ready mentor who was able to discuss the company's requirements in more detail.

Following a consultation, it was decided that Emerald Group needed to focus on two areas: marketing and customer service.

Sarah, Darren and their co-directors were able to work with two training providers to shape the content to their needs and challenges.

Emerald Group then sent their team members on the workshops (four on marketing, seven on customer service) and saw immediate results in their day-to-day operations, business strategy and sales.

For instance, following the assistance from Business Ready, the company created a marketing apprentice role, introduced a quarterly customer feedback survey and designed new performance metrics for the technical support team.

Growth-wise, Emerald Group had its strongest sales quarter in 10 years of

trading for Q1 2019. The company hit its 2016 turnover total by the start of June this year.

Sarah said: "I don't believe we would have got this level of business improvement through general training alone.

"Our team members participated in a range of weird and wonderful exercises – all of which were geared towards getting them to think differently.

"One of the marketing activities involved planning for a Christmas party – in July!

"On the customer services side, all of our employees have benefited from Business Ready, which analysed our company and our customers and then provided bespoke training accordingly.

"Our clients all have the same thing in common: they want to use technology to achieve their goals. They also want the highest level of support and expertise, and working with Business Ready has certainly helped us to deliver on both of these requirements."

## The Results

Since receiving support from Business Ready, Sarah and Darren have been able to build on the workshops and develop their own training plans specific to the Emerald Group's needs and requirements.

"The business owners told us that the company has enjoyed quarter-on-quarter growth at a sustainable rate." said Ian McFarlane-Toms.

He went on to say, "The staff members at Emerald are now better-prepared to develop their own personal skills sets, and that affords the management team an opportunity to further develop employees from within, and to assign them additional responsibilities."

## Business support for the next level

The Business Ready programme is managed by the business support team at the University of Warwick Science Park. The experienced Business Growth Advisers team have been delivering business growth and support services to technology based businesses for over 30 years.

In addition, the team are supported by a range of specialist mentors who have run their own businesses and have expertise and experience supporting, advising, coaching and mentoring other growth businesses.



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