

THE INTERVIEW

■ Maurice Buckley chief executive, National Standards Authority of Ireland

Standard bearer for quality has vision for a brighter tomorrow

From scales to petrol pumps, the NSAI is making its mark

Laura Noonan

THE plaque on the wall at the National Standards Authority of Ireland (NSAI) in the Northwood Office Park doesn't exactly scream "ground-breaking work in progress".

And the NSAI certainly isn't the first thing that pops into mind when it comes to giving businesses their big break and putting companies at the forefront of the next big thing in their industries.

But scratch the surface, and there's a lot happening at the national standards body that most people wouldn't expect.

As Ireland's vehicle in the global standards debate, the NSAI is already working on the exact specifications for technologies and products that are years away from mass market.

Companies joining their standards group have been rewarded with everything from a voice in the debate, to a head-start on the competition, to a step-changing international contract.

Responsible

The NSAI was also responsible for spear-heading Ireland's adoption of the ISO-9000 quality standard - a competitive edge that NSAI boss Maurice Buckley credits with fuelling the Celtic Tiger.

More recently, the NSAI has been enshrined as the "contact point" for Ireland's imports, furthering international trade by helping foreign companies make sure their products don't fall foul of local rules.

And the 180-man body is also responsible for making sure that every weighing scales in the country's supermarkets is calibrated to exactly the right setting, as is every petrol pump and every taxi-meter.

Of all the remits crowding his desk it's the NSAI's role in setting standards, and the potential for Irish companies to "milk" the standards system, that most excites Buckley.

The most obvious way for companies to benefit from the

PROFILE

● **Family** Married to Mary, two sons and two daughters, from 12 to 19

● **Last Book** Instruction to Deliver by Michael Barber

● **Last Film** Marley & Me, with the family

● **Favourite restaurant** Kettlers, Lahinch

● **Car** Saab

● **Hobbies** Bridge, rugby and all sports to watch

NSAI's standards roll is by joining committees and influencing the standards that emerge.

"I worked in Germany and they had layers of committees for regions and states so the chances of a small company getting access to international committees were pretty much zero," says Buckley.

"In Ireland, in a whole range of technical areas, we have only one or two players, so very small companies can have a chance to make their voice heard in the international debate."

The mechanics of the international debate mean that when standards come down to a vote, Ireland's nod is worth as much as the ballot cast by super-powers like China and the US. When it comes to standards that are achieved by consensus, Buckley says Ireland has a "huge" voice thanks to the "gift of the gab" and our native English tongue.

"Any reputational damage that's been done to Ireland has been at the macro-economic level," he insists. "Irish suppliers, products, people and skills are as highly regarded as they ever were."

As well as nudging the eventual standards towards their preferences, small companies also get a head-start on ensuring their new products match the agreed international norm. "If you're Sony you've some chance of going it alone with



Maurice Buckley: 'We are responsible for making sure that every weighing scales in the country's supermarkets is calibrated to exactly the right setting, as is every petrol pump and every taxi-meter.'

something like BluRay (DVDs), but if you're a small player you've got to line up with the standards and the sooner the better," says Buckley.

Then there are the benefits to be reaped from the whole process of setting standards. "We had a small Cork technology company lately that got involved in an international committee in their area," recalls Buckley.

Presentation
"The chairman of the group was very impressed by what they were doing and asked them to make a presentation at the next meeting. A large European banking group was part of that group and when he saw the

presentation he said his bank would love to do a beta site of the Cork company's software all across Europe.

"That single event has radically changed the future for that company."

Buckley cites technology group Iona as another company that's used the NSAI standards groups to its advantage, by being at the cutting edge of developments in their industry and scoring big contracts from standards group colleagues.

He believes many more could follow in their footsteps. "The standards committees are a resource that companies just don't use enough," he says. "I would say to companies -

THE WHOLE SYSTEM HAS PROVEN

to really help companies get on top of their game, and that's why customers want it

come in and milk it. Even if you can only come to a few sessions, milk the opportunity for all the knowledge and the contacts that are there to be had."

The opportunities presented by the likes of ISO-9000 cer-

tification are different, Buckley says, but he insists benefits do exist. Some companies, though, see the standard as unwelcome red tape.

"If you're a new company and you're rearing to go; and then you find out big customers won't buy from you unless you're certified, that feels like a burden," he says. "On the other hand, the whole system has proven to really help companies get on top of their game and that's why customers want it. If people were aware of its history they wouldn't see it as a burden."

That history dates back to the late 1980s, when Ireland was one of the first countries to "latch on" to the concept of hav-

ing an international quality mark for processes and business.

"We were trying to develop the Irish economy internationally and the question was: 'How do we persuade European companies to buy from here when their image of Ireland is Bord Failte's pictures of the ass and cart and turf?'" he recalls.

"Then the ISO came along, and Ireland could say its work was of international standard." From his vantage point in Germany, Buckley watched as Ireland's ISO endorsement prompted the likes of BMW to favour Irish suppliers over local ones.

Twenty years on, and the NSAI is a global force in certifi-

cation. Many international companies adopted the ISO standards in Ireland first, and call on the NSAI to certify plants as far afield as Asia and the US.

"They pay for it and they pay well," says Buckley.

"We want to keep the NSAI burden on the Irish taxpayer as low as possible."

The NSAI is also at the cutting edge when it comes to certifying medical devices firms for the "much tougher" version of ISO they face, as well as certifying their products for the European market.

"Eight of the top 10 medical devices companies in the world have a presence in Ireland," says Buckley. "Having their certification done here creates a really strong link."

The NSAI's new product contact centre wouldn't seem to be particularly beneficial for Irish companies, since it will make it easier for international businesses to sell into Ireland.

"Competition is good for the Irish consumer and the Irish market," says Buckley.

"And if any Irish companies are exporting to a new country, we can help them find out what the rules are so they won't develop a whole batch of product that's banned."

Consumer

The fruit scales, taxi-meters and petrol pumps are another realm where the NSAI plays consumer champion. The NSAI carries out regular checks, and responds to concerns from the public.

The body's powers allow it to take outlets to court and fine them heavily if they're found to be ripping off customers.

"It almost never comes to that," says Buckley. "The reputational damage would be so huge that businesses would jump through hoops to ensure their equipment is right."

The recession, he admits, may make some businesses more likely to "take a chance". But the enforcement side of the house isn't where he sees the recession having its main impact.

"Companies can't stay in survival mode forever; those that are left need to be looking forward now because banks won't support yesterday's ideas," he says.

And the forum for tomorrow's ideas, he adds, is the standards groups.

A good eye for a letting investment reaps rich rewards for having guts and vision

Laura Noonan

Just before the recession hit, solicitor Howard Doyle sold his Ballsbridge apartment and channelled "every penny" into a Blackrock property play.

It sounds like a recipe for disaster; but far from getting his fingers burnt, the Dubliner is now gearing up to do it all again and has already bought the land in Killiney.

Needless to say, Doyle's property play of choice isn't apartments. Instead he's gone for high-spec serviced office suites - a sector he says is booming as the recession prompts businesses to downsize, and laid-off executives to set up their own consultancies.

The genesis for the 35-year-old's officesuites.ie emerged from necessity. When Doyle and his father bought Blackrock's Anglesea House back in 2005 they looked at developing apartments before the property market began to turn.

Then they decided to rent the whole building out as one lot, and handed it over to estate agents. After six months of "no bites", they switched to letting it as several smaller lots "to keep the building warm while we decided what do to with it," Doyle recalls.

Within three weeks, the whole building was let to seven separate companies on short-term leases. "We knew we were on to

something," says Doyle.

That "something" was bringing the traditional serviced office concept out from the city centre and into suburbs where people actually live, or can easily commute to.

Once the DoYLES decided serviced offices was where the long-term future of Anglesea House lay, they began drawing up plans for an extensive refurb that would allow them to charge higher rents.

In early 2008, the seven original clients were asked to vacate for about four months while the work was carried out. "It was a huge risk," says Doyle. "But it was the difference between this business breaking even or losing money."

Even before the credit crunch finance was tough, prompting Doyle to sell his apartment to fund the renovations. The project came in at €120,000 over budget at €600,000 and took three months longer than planned. "Once I saw it all coming together I wanted to go for the nice tiles, the nice boardroom table, the delux IT system," Doyle recalls. "It all added up."

As Doyle was picking the best and the shiniest, the Irish economy was edging closer to freefall. "That meant we had to go for the extras, because we needed to stand out," he insists.

The new suites were launched this January, to a very changed world and Doyle was forced to lower his



Howard Doyle of officesuites.ie. It genesis was born out of necessity - identifying the need to provide the traditional serviced offices in the suburbs where people live and want to work in, like at Anglesea House on Carysfort Avenue in Blackrock.

expected prices by about 20pc.

The delay meant none of the seven original customers came back, but Doyle says business is "going great" after the recession proved an unlikely "recruitment vehicle".

"We offer one-person offices for as little as €390 a month, plus an extra €20 a month for broadband, plus a charge for whatever phonecalls you make," says Doyle. "If clients need extra space for a few days a

month, they can just pay for it for those few days. If they end up expanding they can take on extra space and not have to change their stationery or anything."

The value, coupled with the flexibility, means "people who have never looked at serviced offices before are looking at them now," Doyle says.

Officesuites.ie also offers a "Business Assist Panel" where tenants can link up with solicitors, accountants, web designers, IT consultants, life coaches and other professionals hand-picked by Doyle.

Anglesea House's other big selling points are its high-spec design - "we want people to skip into work because they're coming to a really cool place" - and the suburban Blackrock location has proved a hit with southsiders who "can't take the traffic anymore".

More than 60pc of the 26-suite building is occupied, pushing the project past the break-even point even at the lower rates. What began as a stop-gap

solution to fill the building has become Doyle's passion, and he's just applied for planning permission for another set of suites in Killiney.

The €3m project is about a month away from applying for planning permission, making January the most optimistic date for starting work on the building and next summer the earliest launch date.

But Doyle is already thinking further ahead looking at Malahide, Howth, Monkstown, Dalkey - out of town areas similar to Blackrock really," he says. "Beyond that, we'd be looking at rolling it out in Galway, Cork, Limerick, maybe up North."

The factor clipping officesuites.ie's wings is likely to be finance, he admits.

"In a year's time when I'm looking for finance to build the next centre I'm not just going with a business plan, I'm actually bringing them out here and telling them we're just replicating this somewhere else," he says.

"That will hopefully make lenders more comfortable." As for officesuites.ie's immediate prospects, other Dublin serviced offices dispute Doyle's claims that the recession helps the sector, and serviced office giant Regus recently admitted occupancy and rate levels are taking a hit.

"It's a tough year to set up a new business, and if we finish at break even we'll be very, very happy," says Doyle.

"In terms of turning profit, we'll probably experience that with a bit of luck early next year."

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