

Annie starts from ground up with BDC

Annie Perkins is the founder and managing director of Hamilton based company Groundwork Associates.

This five year old business provides facilitation, consultation, sustainable management and learning to a wide range of businesses.

"Strong foundations through effective involvement of people" was the principle that led to the business name. Annie herself has a particular niche in sustainable agriculture and environmental management. Annie has a strong background in dairying, having completed a degree in dairy science in Virginia and a masters in ecologic economics in Edinburgh. There sustainability was a phrase she became familiar with well ahead of its common use. Initially starting in a one room shed, the business now employs three people (CHK) and operates from a 1920s bungalow Annie has had converted for energy efficiency and environmental sustainability.

The conversion was no small task but, now that the job is done, the Te Aroha St location – called The Greenspace - provides a high profile base for her company and reflects her personal and business philosophy.

Annie attributes part of her success to an initial and on-going relationship with Hamilton's Business Development Centre (BDC), a source of quality mentoring, advice and courses for small start up businesses.

What prompted you to leave a secure corporate environment to go it alone in a specialised area like facilitation and environmental consultation?

I enjoyed my role at Environment Waikato but had some specific projects I really wanted to pursue, including the opportunity to lead the community consultation for the Maungatautari Ecological Island Restoration project. With a farming background I was also attracted to the culture of small business.

What were some of the initial skills you needed to build on, when you decided to go into business for yourself?

I went to the BDC and did a couple of courses that focussed on office management, business and financial management. I found them extremely useful, particularly when dealing with all the compliance areas like PAYE



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and GST, which I had had no experience in.

I have sent key staff on these same courses so we all speak the same "language" about how the office runs.

Did you seek out any mentoring or coaching advice when you started out?

Definitely! I got that from Sandy Turner and Steve Murray at BDC. What I liked about them was they were extremely approachable and came to see me at my place. Despite it only being a tiny shed, they were happy to sit down there with me and help me through the strategic planning and business side of things.

What are some of the challenges in building the business that contact with BDC has helped you with?

When you are "head down" in your own business the biggest challenge is that you simply don't have the time to stop and re-focus on what your goals are, or how they may need adjusting.

I found ongoing contact with the likes of Steve at BDC gave me someone to bounce ideas off and plan how to grow the business.

What have you achieved in that respect?

Creation of The Greenspace is a key element. The property has space for two other tenants in addition to Groundwork Associates and it also contains a large meeting room, available for hire, that takes advantage of our very central location. It has a covered outdoor area and is very handy to the University, Dexcel, AgResearch and Fonterra offices. Running the venue is a

good fit with my existing business as clients can use my facilitation services for meetings or workshops if they wish.

BDC is helping us learn some new skills necessary to market this side of the business. It is a new area for me and promoting it to potential users has its challenges.

I am also looking at the skills that my team and I have developed over the past five years – such as strategic planning, event management and communications - and seeing how I can re-package these skills to reach new clients or expand the services available to existing ones. We have also developed a niche specialising in work with charitable trusts that have very different business models to commercial operations.

Do you intend to have on-going contact with BDC, despite having been up and running for a few years now?

Most certainly. I firmly believe in the importance of mentoring and extended learning, partly because this is what Groundwork Associates does too. The BDC provides an invaluable source of advice and network of contacts.

I have also identified a BDC leadership development course that would be very useful to attend, now that the business has grown beyond just me.

Do you send your key staff to BDC courses?

I have sent our office manager to attend the financial management and office systems courses I attended initially. I also brought in Steve as a mentor to get staff involved with new systems and procedures, which proved invaluable.

Finally, any advice to anyone considering using the BDC?

Simply go for it! The resources within the centre are extremely useful and often contacts you make through the centre become clients or suppliers later.

The skills you acquire are never lost and will only add value to you professionally and ultimately boost your business's profitability.

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