

Spare room is hub of global network

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By Jonathan Moules

Like many successful entrepreneurs, Christian Arno started his business in a spare room.

His translation company Lingo 24 now turns over £1.5m, making £120,000 profit last year, and employs 40 staff in China, New Zealand and Romania.

But unlike other ambitious businessmen, Mr Arno has no intention of moving his headquarters from the upstairs of his two-bedroom house in Deptford.

"It is quite nice here, particularly by Deptford standards," Mr Arno says, as he tries to convince me that the small room in the home he shares with his girlfriend is preferable to the kind of plush premises his competitors rent in central London.

"There is a quality of life argument to this way of working," he adds. "I can roll out of bed, have my breakfast and start up."

The absence of an office has proved no barrier to growth for Lingo, whose clients include BP, Honda, Ikea, Orange and Travelex and can be found as far afield as Israel, Japan and Switzerland.

Although Mr Arno is based in London, he registered the company near his parents' home in Aberdeenshire, which led to a number of introductions to large companies involved in the local oil industry, such as the Wood Group and Varco.

The advantages of not being tied to an office go much further than the two-minute commute, Mr Arno adds.

Spending money on office space gives a bad return on investment, particularly for a small business where money is tight, he notes.

Removing such overheads helps Lingo offer prices up to 30 per cent cheaper than its larger competitors.

Given that all the day-to-day information about the company can be stored on a laptop, Mr Arno can literally take his office with him.

Rather than travelling to a physical space, employees log on to the company's central database, where all the information about translation projects is stored.

"It is the central repository for everything," Mr Arno says. "It is a bit more extensive than most company databases. It includes a lot of information to help people because they don't have John at the desk next door to ask when they have a problem."

Home working is also attractive to the kind of skilled professionals Lingo needs to maintain high levels of quality demanded by clients.

Some of the company's best recruits were found in the most remote locations, such as small Romanian villages, Mr Arno notes.

The first translators Lingo employed in the UK were all middle-aged mothers, living in various parts of Scotland, who liked the security of a salaried post but the flexibility to fit their work around collecting the kids from school.

"If I had wanted these colleagues to come into an office I might have lost them," Mr Arno says.

Being rootless also liberated Mr Arno to look all over the world for his staff. At the end of 2003 he flew out to New Zealand and spent five months recruiting a manager and two linguists specialising in French and German. He then spent three weeks in Beijing and Shanghai, recruiting another two translators.

This enabled the company to offer a round-the-clock service with clients in London able to

drop off documents at the end of their working day and receive the finished items first thing the next morning.

Mr Arno is particularly proud of the team he hired in Romania last year. He notes that eCode, an offshoring consultancy, ranks the country as the most multilingual nation in Europe after the Netherlands.

Home working was not always an easy concept to sell to staff in countries that have yet to reach a critical mass of high-speed internet connections, Mr Arno admits.

"When we first went to Romania, it was a bit unusual to have people working from home."

New recruits were forced to travel to colleagues' houses to get access to a fast connection, although Mr Arno stresses that the Romanian infrastructure has improved dramatically in just a few months.

The biggest potential drawback of not having an office space is the lack of interaction between employees.

Skype, email and the company's intranet are used for day-to-day communication and enable Lingo to maintain editorial oversight as each piece is translated to ensure the quality of the work.

However, regular face-to-face meetings are also vital, Mr Arno notes.

Every month, for instance, the UK workforce has a get-together in Oxfordshire. Although these are meant to be a "a meal, a drink and a laugh", according to Mr Arno, they are also needed for effective management.

"There is no substitute for sitting down with someone," he says. "Things will come up that you will not have mentioned on an email or Skype."

"Personally I know I am much better with people when I am face to face with them."

With email and Skype, you can be a bit short or miscommunicate your intentions."

As good as Deptford gets, Mr Arno is likely to be spending increasing amounts of time outside his spare room to expand his business further.

Countries: China; New Zealand; Romania;

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