

BUSINESS PROFILE: CHRISTIAN ARNO

Talking language of business

Former north-east entrepreneur of the year Christian Arno is demonstrating a flair for commerce as well as for languages. *Keith Findlay* found out more

A translation service launched in Aberdeen just over eight years ago has developed into a multimillion-pound global business.

The man behind it is Christian Arno, who has steered his company - lingo24 - to impressive growth from small beginnings in his parents' home.

Mr Arno's story is all the more remarkable in that he is rather younger than many entrepreneurs, having just recently turned 30.

Lingo24 now has around 90 staff worldwide and a network of more than 3,000 translators.

It has its administrative base in Aberdeen, but also does business through offices in Edinburgh, Manchester and London plus overseas operations in China, France, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Panama, Romania, Sweden and America.

The company's translators handle a broad range of material, ranging from legal documents and corporate presentations to complex jargon-laden documents for the financial services sector.

Annual turnover has mushroomed from just £47,000 in 2002 to £2.9million in the past trading year and a projected £4million during the firm's current 12-month financial period to the end of September.

"We are growing everywhere and growing very quickly," said Mr Arno, who is based in Romania nowadays.

There have been many memorable milestones along the way, including lingo24's majority owner and director Mr Arno winning the Shell LiveWIRE North-east Entrepreneur of the Year award in 2003.

When he won the accolade, he was one of just two full-time staff managing work subcontracted to freelance translators worldwide.

At the time, he aimed to make lingo24 the "top online brand" in translation services and hoped to take on "several" more employees.

Within a year, the firm had set up an operation employing two people in New

Zealand. Lingo24 expanded to China in 2004, again with two staff and an operation was launched in Romania a year later.

The Romanian business, which started with five employees, now has more than 60 staff, making it the largest single lingo24 site.

An office opened in Panama just over a year ago now has 10 workers, while closer to home lingo24 launched an operation in Edinburgh - employing five people - just a few months back.

About 90% of customers still come to the company via the internet, but the firm has increasingly looked to win new business through a direct sales approach.

Mr Arno's first stab at running his own business came in 1999 while he was studying in Italy.

The following year he set up www.tgv24.com, an online

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translation, proof-reading and European marketing service. Four languages were covered: French, German, Italian and English.

Mr Arno, whose father Per successfully oversaw the establishment and development of Aberdeen's Satrosphere science centre after its relocation to the Tramsheds in 2001, had already shown a flair for linguistics.

The former Cults Primary School and Robert Gordon's College pupil studied French and Italian at Oxford University.

Nowadays, he can also get by to varying degrees in German, Spanish and Romanian.

His initial website - using professionally qualified translators around the world - evolved into lingo24, which was formally established in 2001 following a £5,000 loan

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from the Prince's Scottish Youth Business Trust.

One of the firm's early projects involved helping Rothienorman-based Mackie's of Scotland to sell its ice-cream in South Korea during the 2002 football World Cup.

The tie-up meant Mackie's was able to communicate more effectively with a Far Eastern trading partner, resulting in significant ice-cream sales.

Mr Arno could hardly have asked for a better demonstration of the role linguistic skills could play in turning commercial expertise into export success.

Lingo24's clients come

from a wide range of sectors and from many different countries.

Customers include the MTV Europe Foundation, Save the Children, Campari, Guinness, Bloomberg, the Royal Bank of Scotland, VisitScotland, Orange, T-Mobile, Liverpool City Council and the BBC.

In the oil and gas sector, the client list includes BP, Wood Group and Varco.

The same year as the Shell LiveWIRE success, lingo24 was honoured for its innovative use of the internet at the Web (W@W) 2003 awards and in 2005 Mr Arno was selected as one of the outstanding young people of

the year in a competition organised by Junior Chamber International Scotland.

His entrepreneurial skills were evident from an early age.

"I have always been coming with ideas," said Mr Arno, citing childhood business deals he struck on bus trips between the family home at Bieldside and Robert Gordon's.

He added: "I bought chewing gum for a penny each and sold them for 2p on the way home, instantly doubling my money."

The interest in languages is perhaps not surprising, given the family background.

His father is Norwegian,

and his mother, Lisa, Westhill Academy's head of humanities, hails from London.

There is also South African and Irish blood in the overall mix.

Mr Arno is an avid football fan and keeps a close eye on the fortunes of Aberdeen FC despite spending most of his time in Romania these days.

He was in both Madrid and Munich for the Dons' Uefa Cup adventure last season and tries to get to Pittodrie Stadium whenever he can.

Meanwhile, his own amateur footballing efforts during frequent visits back to the UK involve appearances for two Aberdeen fans' teams: In-

Factfile

What car do you drive?

I don't have a car. I walk, cycle and take public transport most of the time, or hire cars if necessary.

What's your favourite restaurant?

For a treat, the Silver Darling in Aberdeen.

Have you ever broken the law?

No comment.

What or who makes you laugh?

Sacha Baron Cohen is a genius - I particularly liked Borat. I'm also a big fan of Harry Enfield and Paul Whitehouse.

What's your favourite book?

I'm not a big reader. I really enjoyed *How to be Free* by Tom Hodgkinson.

What's your favourite film?

The ones that stick out recently are *Control* and *Little Miss Sunshine*.

What's your favourite singer/band?

Radiohead, with Belle and Sebastian a close second.

Ideal job, other than this one?

A professional footballer.

What's the best piece of business advice you have ever received?

Trust your instinct.

Worst business advice?

Nobody's going to buy translation services over the internet.

What do you drink? Anything really. I like Grolsch and Brew-Dog beers.

How much was your first pay packet and what was it for? It was about £2.50 for a Sunday paper round in Mannofield.

How do you keep fit? Football and tennis. I go for the odd run; I love running in the rain.

What's your most interesting habit? Friends have said my habit of raising up the sleeve of my T-shirt above the shoulder makes me genuinely eccentric.

What's your biggest extravagance? Food. I'm happy to pay for really good food.

With which historical or fictional character do you most identify? Peter Pan.

How would you like to be remembered? Someone who had fun doing good stuff for people.

Year born: 1978.

Education: Cults Primary 1983-88; Robert Gordon's College 1988-1997 and St John's College, Oxford, 1997-2001.

ter Malamb and London's Rob Roy Reds. Other interests include European cinema, music, economics and environmental issues, hence his insistence on using public transport wherever possible.

"I never fly within the UK and recycle everything," said Mr Arno, whose adopted home city Timisoara in western Romania turns out to be just like Aberdeen in many ways.

"There are a lot of similarities," he said, adding: "Timisoara is an old university town miles from the capital and a relatively well-off part of Romania. It's a beautiful city and so is the countryside around it."

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MULTICULTURAL: Christian Arno . . . his interests include European cinema, music, economics and environmental issues. Photograph: Colin Rennie

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