

## Gemma Morgan-Jones talks to IoD Midlands' Rob Beswick about the University of Nottingham's Business Network

The UK's universities aren't just outstanding seats of world-class academia: they are also a treasure trove of information, knowledge and research that is ideally suited to help businesses – particularly SMEs – develop products, enter new markets or refine their processes and systems.

But to the average director, knowing how to access the talent that lies behind universities' often grand front doors can seem daunting.

However, the University of Nottingham has made this process simple – just go through its Business Network.

Gemma Morgan-Jones, SME Engagement Manager at the University of Nottingham, said the door analogy is appropriate. "I describe our Business Network as the 'front door' to the university as far as directors and business leaders are concerned. We have a huge amount of expertise to offer the business community but from the outside, I can understand why it would appear difficult to find the right people to talk to, or know how to access help. The Business Network is a way you can cut through the departments and faculties and connect directly with our staff. They can provide you with the services you need to develop and grow your business."

The type of help on offer is incredibly wide, as Gemma explains. "The principal way directors get involved with us in the first instance tends to be through our events programme. At these we cover issues in depth, led by sector experts often drawn from within our own ranks who can offer real insights into how to meet current challenges or plan ahead to prepare for the next hot topic."

As an example, two events in 2022 cover 'The Future Customer', which will look at how buying habits have changed over the years and what they will look like in the years to come, while The Future of Leadership will consider the skills and characteristics we are going to need as leaders in the future as the demands of our workforces change.

The events themselves are very informal, with plenty of opportunities for Q&A and networking. Says Gemma: "The events are very light touch, with no formal joining process. You just register with ourselves, subscribe to our mailing list and sign up to any events that catch your eye."

"The events are free and usually take place as a breakfast or after work event to make them as accessible as possible for all."

The Business Network has been running for 18 years, and in that time

has grown into thriving group of over 1,500 individuals. Hundreds of East Midlands business leaders have attended at least one, coming away with vital knowledge that has helped their businesses maintain a competitive edge.

But the University of Nottingham Business Network has another string to its bow: it helps you develop direct connections with the academics themselves.

Gemma explains: “The Business Network is a gateway to the knowledge and expertise that exists within the university. Our staff can bring real cutting-edge thought leadership on any topic or area that’s important to you. For instance, from the engineering department they could lead on research and design on a new project, bringing high-level technical expertise to bear and filling gaps in your own team’s skill set. Or you could take on a postgraduate who will bring a PhD level of research expertise, on a mini-consultancy basis.”

The cost of such an arrangement is heavily subsidised or, in many cases, free. “If your business is operating in the D2N2 area, you can engage one of our postgraduates on an appropriate project for free. Even if you are paying, you can be looking at it costing just £1,000 for 200 hours of postgrad involvement.”

There are other schemes that businesses can access, too: “We deliver the Help to Grow programme on behalf of the government. [It’s](#) 1:1 support from a business mentor and access to our alumni network. The 12-week course is designed to be taken alongside full-time work through a combination of online sessions and face-to-face learning and is 90% funded by the government so you only pay £750.”

The University of Nottingham Business Network can be a bit of a ‘best-kept secret’ among business leaders, but those who have accessed its events or connected with university staff have high praise for its effectiveness.

Neil Stentiford is one such local business leader who reaped the benefits of his own involvement with the university. Neil, who invented the SoeMac, an innovative oxygen device for people with sleep and energy deficiencies, commented: “As a small business owner I found I had great ideas, energy, passion and drive, but lacked certain resources such as specific expertise, money and manpower. These are all potentially available to access within the university.

“I attended the regular University of Nottingham Business Network events and established a network of contacts that led us to undertake a number of funded projects with the university, including: materials analysis, product redesign, electrical engineering expertise, a

postgraduate intern specialising in Autism and an introduction by the university's Asia Business Centre to a Chinese distributor.

"We've attended various free seminars and courses at the university such as The Business of Stories and Strategic Social Media Marketing. Plus, we've also benefitted from introductions to other organisations like the Next Business Generation, Nottingham Trent University and The Queens Medical Centre."

All in all, said Neil, "The University of Nottingham is an excellent resource and I would encourage more businesses to work with them. It's a win/win for both the university and the business owner. If I have a particular need, the University of Nottingham Business Network provides a great starting point and lead into the appropriate contact."

It's a glowing testimony to the effectiveness of the Business Network, and the ease with which directors can access its services. Why not sign up to the mailing list for news of future events, or talk to the SME Engagement team about how university staff could help your business?

For more information see [www.nottingham.ac.uk/go/business-network](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/go/business-network)

Or talk to [Gemma Morgan-Jones](#), SME Engagement Manager,  
University of Nottingham, on t: +44 (0) 115 74 84783  
m: +44 (0) 7811 230 781  
Email: [businessnetwork@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:businessnetwork@nottingham.ac.uk)

Subscribe to the newsletter: [tinyurl.com/uonbn-newsletter](http://tinyurl.com/uonbn-newsletter)

Twitter: @Uon\_BN

Instagram: @uon\_businessnetwork

To run as a side bar:

Member spotlight

Graham is Managing Director of Corporate Money Matters, which is a business consultancy and corporate finance brokerage.

Graham said: "I started attending the University of Nottingham Business Network from the very start and it has provided me personally with a range of benefits, for example:

- being taken out of my comfort zone
- giving me and the business a parallax view, by which I mean providing different perspectives on one object, giving a more rounded approach

- it has assisted me in considering new ways of doing things, for example the Classics Department talking to us about storytelling.

The Network has given us access to academics and to areas of research that would previously have been hidden behind closed doors in what I perceived as an unapproachable institution. It is invaluable for providing networking opportunities with other businesses and with university staff and academics. Since joining the Network, our business has benefited from graduate placements and involvement in R&D projects.

Being a member of the Network has given us a broader perspective as a business and has allowed us to take time out at a convenient time of day to reflect on new ideas and concepts. I would recommend the Network to other business owners as a springboard for new opportunities and ideas."