

PLATO™ Group Exchange Business Wisdom

It's a confidential way of brainstorming problems, a valuable sounding board for ideas and a useful method of gaining business leads – these are just some of the views of Dorset members of PLATO™, the unique business group that is being set-up in Dorset and Hampshire.

Like all good ideas, the concept behind PLATO™ is simple – to encourage peer group learning and so help small and medium-sized businesses continue to thrive and grow. For the members of the original Dorset group, which was launched five years ago and still meets on the first Tuesday of each month, the impact on their business has been hugely beneficial.

Brewery Hall & Woodhouse's Finance Director Martin Scott was one of the two original facilitators along with a Director from Wimborne aerospace firm Flight Refuelling. Martin, who remains a member and hosts all meetings at the brewery, said:

'It's a networking group but it's unique. We don't try to sell to each other although we have given each other work, which is one of the benefits. But there's much more to it than that. We brainstorm issues that members raise in an entirely open but confidential way.'

At other networking events people don't talk freely. At PLATO™ everyone knows that what's discussed doesn't go any



The Dorset Group discussing real business issues

further – it's completely confidential.

Member Dominic Bishop, Managing Director of Total Fire Solutions (South) of Dorchester, said:

'It doesn't seem to matter what the problem is – one of us has probably encountered it before and can help. You also get to find out what's going on in the business world locally. I'd recommend being a member to any business owner as you really do get so much out of it.'

Fellow member Chris Slocock, of Wimborne based printer The Minster Press, said he had found PLATO™ invaluable as his business developed and grew. 'It's been particularly useful in areas like cultural change and strategic change,' he said. 'Some of us are only now implementing changes that we have discussed over the past couple of years. I know I'm always going to get objective advice and help at the PLATO™ meetings.'

'If you are an entrepreneur running your own business, it's difficult to know who to talk to, especially in the current economic climate. At PLATO™ you know you'll get entirely independent advice from people who are running businesses themselves.'

Graham Ball of Ward Goodman chartered accountants and business advisers, based in Wimborne, sees the fact that the members have been meeting for so long as a key strength.

'We can talk about any issue and can be particularly open with each other about what's going on inside our own businesses,' he said.

'We can be honest. You can get down to the real issues. You don't get that with other networking groups. At those everybody says how well they're doing where here we can tell the truth.'

Mike Herrington, owner of Wimborne based Autovan Services, agrees. 'It's only in the past two years that we've really got confident enough to bring issues to each other and discuss them confidentially,' he said. 'But now we trust each other there are no issues that we aren't prepared to talk about, including quite difficult staffing issues sometimes.'

Meetings tend to last for about two hours. Alternate meetings have a speaker on a key business issue – the group has heard from bank managers, psychologists, marketing professionals and human resources experts among others.

The groups are usually made up of 12 to 15 business owner-managers typically employing between 10 and 200 staff.

Research among PLATO™ members shows an average turnover increase of 34 per cent, a 50 per cent increase in new business and a 50 per cent improvement in management skills.



Some of the members of the Dorset Group

PLATO™ is a unique forum that allows small business owners to exchange ideas, share problems and build valuable business relationships, as well as helping them develop their own skills.

'We know from the earlier groups that taking part in PLATO™ can have a hugely beneficial effect on businesses over the medium to long term.'

For more information about the PLATO™ programme and for details about how to become involved either as a Group Facilitator or participant contact us on **08457 35 45 55** or email: info@platogb.co.uk.