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Our strength in Bank of Ireland UK lies in our people and in the relationships we have with our customers. That means providing more to our customers than simply funding. We seek to be partners on our customers’ growth journey, to support them in achieving their ambition to thrive commercially.

We recently launched ‘Bank of Ireland Begin’, a new brand position that demonstrates our core purpose of enabling customers, colleagues and communities across Northern Ireland to thrive.

In life and business there is always a new “begin” opportunity. In business this may be starting, scaling or pivoting the commercial venture through innovation, exporting or acquisition and we want to work with and help our customers on those journeys.

We want to play our role to help to build confidence and support our customers as they face tough challenging commercial landscapes, embrace change and manage demanding market dynamics in the future.

We provide a wide portfolio of flexible financial products and services and access to local business teams, specialist expertise and a wealth of knowledge in global markets, asset finance and invoice discounting which can make a real difference and create very positive outcomes for our customers.

With continuous new customer, technology and market developments it will be imperative that businesses focus on increasing competitiveness and productivity by adapting and adopting new approaches. If you would like to talk about support around business growth, cash flow services and foreign exchange with one of our local business teams then drop into your local branch or business centre to speak to a member of our Business Team.

Promote your events to Northern Ireland’s technology & business community

By featuring on our website and in our magazine, your event will reach tens of thousands of local technology and business professionals.
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Your Career

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A quick look at technology and business events coming up over the next few months
In a world that never stops, is always online, and always connected, it is essential to pump the brakes from time to time and take stock of where you’re going and where you’ve come from. That’s why, at Digital DNA’s eighth annual flagship event in June, it’s important to reflect upon what has been happening in the local technology scene and how far we’ve come as a whole.

Industry stalwarts Kainos and Allstate are prime examples of this. Kainos, the Queen’s University Belfast spinout turned London Stock Exchange-listed company, has announced its plans to develop a new headquarters in Belfast city centre. The firm’s chief executive, Brendan Mooney, isn’t just thinking about the here and now, as he aims to create a space that will permit future growth.

That’s a step that John Healy, Managing Director at Allstate NI, has already taken. Just last summer, the firm – Northern Ireland’s largest IT company – opened a new £30m office. As well as maintaining offices in the northwest, the 140,000 sq ft building will provide more than enough space for the company’s Belfast-based employees.

Northern Ireland’s reputation as a global technology hub is further underlined with the commitment from the professional services sector. The largest of the firms here, PwC NI, is creating one of the city centre’s most innovative digital spaces in its new £70 million HQ – Merchant Square – which will be home to 3,000 people next year.

The global firm’s confidence in the local team is evident with PwC’s blockchain capabilities being led by the team in Belfast, and it has also recruited for its second year of fully-funded tech degree apprenticeships at QUB. With an approach based on innovating through collaboration and design thinking, it’s inspiring to see what some perceive as a traditional industry diversify with great success.

Also investing in its digital offerings is Deloitte, which has announced its own move to Bedford Square where it will bring together its 1,000 staff. In recent years, technology has been a key part of its growth plans and it has also launched its own 8-week tech-focused course at Belfast Metropolitan College.

Success notwithstanding, all of the above firms are continuing to pave the way and shine the light in terms of their commitment to ongoing innovation and the advancement of the local technology scene.

The work of Invest NI over the last year has been paramount. With outgoing chief executive Alastair Hamilton at the helm, the economic development agency has been relentless in...
attracting foreign direct investors within the technology sector. Firms such as Unosquare and Signifyd have indicated they plan to double their current Belfast workforce from 50 to 100 people and create 150 jobs respectively. Couple this with the multitude of other firms already in-situ across Northern Ireland and it’s easy to see the multiplier effect.

Catalyst is yet another institutional pillar that is at the forefront of supporting an eclectic mix of entrepreneurs, start-ups and pioneers. Under the guidance of Steve Orr, the innovative ecosystem is one of the key drivers of our local knowledge economy. In the last year, we have seen Catalyst itself venture into Belfast’s core city centre with the launch of its Fintech Hub. Its location on the ground floor of Danske Bank’s headquarters is in itself an ideal match, with the bank having increased its own focus on innovation by looking for disruptive new ideas and technologies that will add value for its customers.

Davids amongst Goliaths
It’s not all about the ‘big boy’ companies.

Medical tech firm axial3D – alongside Belfast City Hospital’s Dr Tim Brown – undertook a world-first life-saving operation with its technology. The team has been using machine learning to complete complicated and laborious medical tasks to create 3D-printable models for pre-operative planning from 2D scans, which in turn is helping remove costly human interventions. Founded in 2015 by chief executive Daniel Crawford, this local firm truly is helping to save lives by allowing surgeons to treat their patients more effectively.

Another smaller company, but no less brimming with innovation, is north Down’s See.Sense. Led by husband-and-wife team Philip and Irene McAleese, the firm’s smart-cycle lights have taken the global cycling community by storm.

With its IoT-enabled lights collecting data on speed, collisions, and journey routes, they will be working alongside BT and the European Commission to garner fresh insights into cycling within cities. It turns out there are even plans for corporate firms wishing to understand how much CO2 is saved by their cyclist employees.

For anyone who thought a cycle light was exactly that, the See.Sense team is an example of how a traditional product can be transformed through innovation. Earlier this year, Irene, the firm’s chief strategy officer, told me how it is no longer a cycle light company, but rather a data company that is helping to reshape and improve things for cyclists. Chief executive Philip is bang-on when he said the company was “out to change the world”. Simply remarkable.

With a world-renowned cybersecurity centre at CSIT, the UK’s Innovation and Knowledge Centre for secure information technologies, U.S. firms such as Rapid7 and Proofpoint already in place, the recent announcement that QUB will be offering 40 full scholarships to its specialist cybersecurity MSc programme, and SaltDNA’s admittance onto Tech Nation’s cyber security scale-up programme, it’s abundantly clear that this branch of the sector is on an increasingly upward trajectory.

We’ve also seen how an inspired community can grow from the ground up. AI NI aims to drive networking amongst the artificial intelligence community in Northern Ireland and
the team behind it – Kainos’ Dr Austin Tanney, Chloe Thompson and Jordan McDonald – have been instrumental in showcasing the amazing AI work that goes on here.

**What’s the deal?**
But our tech achievements aren’t just limited to our capital city. Newry and Derry-Londonderry are continuing to flourish, thanks in part to the efforts of companies such as sportstech firm STATSports, First Derivatives plc., and Alchemy Technology Services. Add in the Maiden City’s Ulster University and Catalyst sites and Newry’s position on the north-south economic corridor and there is a real sense of scale around the sector.

With both cities being benefactors of city deals – Newry as part of Newry, Mourne and Down District Council’s inclusion in the Belfast Region City Deal and Derry-Londonderry as part of the Derry and Strabane district area – their respective digital and tech sectors will continue to grow through job creation, boosting the local economy.

City deal. The big one. With £350million being invested into the Belfast Region by the UK Government over the next 15 years, one of the core aspects within it surrounds innovation and the digital space. Initial plans involve the creation of global centres of excellence in partnership with enhanced digital capability and connectivity.

That’s not bad for a year in the NI tech scene.

**A digital future**
As part of our own commitment to the continued development of the sector, we successfully launched our Digital Futures programme last year, which brought together some of the most inspiring tech leaders to showcase the different opportunities available to young people.

With a focus on youth and community engagement, the programme is supported by Young Enterprise NI, Cinemagic, Sentinus, and Counter Extremism Project. It aims to develop participants’ entrepreneurial and leadership skills, explore potential career opportunities, and promote online safety, as well as encouraging civic activism.

Through it, we were able to provide young people with the opportunity to win a VIP trip to the U.S. to meet with some of the world’s most influential tech leaders at firms such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter.

It’s something we’re extremely proud of.

**Explore your curiosity**
It’s for reasons like this that the Digital DNA team do what we do. We want to encourage and support the growth of all things digital and to keep digital technology at the forefront of people’s minds. With digital technology being a part of all our lives, we want leading digital companies, fast-growing enterprises, blue-chip organisations, SMEs, and start-ups to share their knowledge and ideas, overcome the challenges, and realise the opportunities to transform the digital landscape.

We do this by bringing together as many great people as we possibly can, from all industry sectors and disciplines, in a vibrant and energetic environment. We don’t do roundtables and notepads. We create immense, collaborative events that act as dynamic gatherings.

We want to highlight to those who think tech is ‘just for techies’ that it’s not. It’s transforming all of our everyday work and social lives.

That’s why events like Digital DNA are so important for the sector in Northern Ireland.

We’re a true melting pot of ideas and experiences.

We want to continue to raise the profile of the sector in Northern Ireland, not only locally, but further afield.

We want to encourage more talent to get into the industry, which in turn ultimately helps to foster inclusive and sectoral growth.

And why not? After all, it’s in our DNA.
Preparing today’s tech talent for tomorrow

Louise Hull, Apprentice Programme Manager at Fujitsu NI, discusses the need for emerging talent to coincide with the ongoing growth of emerging technologies.

While the political landscape may be paved with uncertainty, one thing remains certain – technology will continue to change the landscape of today’s working environment and the way in which we undertake day-to-day jobs. The need for emerging talent to coincide with the ongoing growth of emerging technologies is therefore imperative to keep our businesses productive.

Many markets are set to undergo significant transformation in the next five years, driven by continued advancements in high-speed mobile internet and analytics, not to mention the ongoing breakthroughs we’re seeing in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and robotics. Attracting digitally native staff as part of this transformation needs to be a key focus for businesses if they are to succeed.

Keeping our tech talent abreast of the latest innovations and bridging skills gaps is particularly important in Northern Ireland when we consider the potential growth of our Knowledge Economy which could create up to 16,500 professional, scientific and technology jobs in a high-growth scenario by 2026.

Our latest report, ‘Co-Creating for Success,’ exploring workplace advancement in an age of digital transformation, found that while 87% of business leaders say attracting digitally native staff will be vital to their success in the next three years, 70% of organisations don’t believe they have found the right skills yet.

The key to overcoming talent barriers is to see digital transformation as an opportunity, not a threat. Technology will alleviate workers from mundane, repetitive tasks and make room for the big issues and they can apply their creativity, knowledge and time to more valued tasks.

Externally, businesses can help build the talent pipeline at every educational touchpoint – through placement opportunities, supporting career fairs and development programmes, as well showcasing the value of a career in IT through visible role models. Internally, businesses can upskill or retrain current employees or returning employees through continuing professional development (CPD) courses, external training or via internal experts and knowledge sharing platforms. Organisations need not just tech savvy people, but also strategists, business and industry experts and managers to foster an environment of knowledge sharing across our businesses.

Training the young people of today for tomorrow is something we’re very passionate about at Fujitsu. Since 2010, we have successfully trained more than 60 apprentices, many of whom are still working in the company today. The apprenticeship courses have a particular focus on emerging tech and trends so that when technologies that were once considered futuristic become a reality, our workforce doesn’t feel marginalised by it. Currently, the two main growth areas covered in the courses are Cloud and Application Development.

We work closely with our partner colleges, Belfast Metropolitan College (BMC) and the North West Regional College (NWRC), to shape the apprenticeship programmes we help deliver, ensuring our apprentices are studying not only the topics most pertinent to the future of the IT industry, but that they gain the transferrable skills to help futureproof their careers.

In the last number of years, we have also increased our outreach activity with local schools, youth organisations, libraries, colleges and universities to showcase the benefits of a job in ICT. Activities such as coding workshops, showcases at career fairs, hosting Open Days and organising work placements, are all essential if we are to inspire the next generation of digital innovators and technologists. Thankfully the number of young people studying ICT at A-Level is on the rise with computing enjoying the biggest leap in entry numbers across all subjects recently.

It could be easy for organisations to get side-tracked by how they can use and incorporate this technology, however for us, it is important that we plan for the entire journey ahead, this includes how we equip our people and our partners on this journey of change.
Nominations for IT Professional of the Year, Young IT Professional of the Year, and IT Educator of the Year closed on May 31 and nominees are eagerly awaiting the awards event to discern who will have the honour of winning.

The Northern Ireland Branch of BCS, the Chartered Institute for IT, decided to present the IT Educator of the Year award for the second consecutive year, attributing the inclusion of the category once again to the pivotal role educators play in mentoring the future of IT.

The IT Professional of the Year division seeks to award someone who has contributed significantly to the advancement of the IT sector in Northern Ireland, directly impacting the local economy or community, or a person who has championed excellence in the IT profession within their own organisation and beyond.

Claire McBride, Managing Director of award sponsor Olenick, said: “Olenick is honoured to be part of the BCS NI Awards for a second year. As a professional services company we recognize the importance of celebrating success. The IT Professional of the Year Award reflects the qualities we believe make IT good for society and acknowledge an individual who has demonstrated excellence through contributing to the development and deployment of innovative IT systems. We wish every candidate the best of luck and look forward to announcing the winner at Digital DNA on 18th June.”

The Young IT Professional of the Year is an award for those...
aged under 35 who not only bring their youthful enthusiasm to the table but have demonstrated outstanding commitment and achievement in their work.

The award sponsor for this category is technical recruitment giant Modis. Michael Blackwood, Head of Technology Recruitment at the firm, stated: “Modis are delighted to be sponsoring this year’s BCS NI Awards and being able to assist in showcasing some of the fabulous talent we have here in Northern Ireland. Modis believe that there is so much potential within the Northern Ireland IT community and no better way to help inspire and motivate more people to come into the industry than partnering with the BCS.”

Finally, the IT Educator of the Year award recognises a teacher who has gone above and beyond in raising awareness and deepening understanding of computing and computational thinking. Nominations from students and organisations are welcome for the category.

Ed Brown, General Manager, Ireland, Capita IT and Networks said: “Capita is delighted to sponsor the 2019 BCS NI IT Educator of the Year Award. “We work closely with every school in Northern Ireland and see daily the impact ICT is making on educational outcomes for pupils, this is achievable by the innovative and inspirational teaching staff and therefore we see the importance of this award in recognising the inspirational role teachers in Northern Ireland play in developing young people as future digital leaders.

“We wish every candidate the best of luck and we look forward to celebrating the talent of NI IT educators at the upcoming awards ceremony.”

An expert judging panel -- comprised of Chair of BCS NI, Rachel Steenson; Claire McBride from Olenick, Dr Irene Bell from Stranmillis College and Computing at School NI and Dave Vincent from Tourism NI -- have the difficult task of selecting the three winners. Andi Jarvis, founder of Eximo Marketing, will host the awards ceremony, which will be held during the Digital DNA conference for the first time.

Rachel Steenson, Chair of BCS NI, was keen to thank the conference for its partnership in delivering the prestigious awards. “We are delighted to be partnering with Digital DNA this year to celebrate the IT Professionals in Northern Ireland. The Digital DNA conference is now the premier event for the Tech community here and we couldn’t think of a better place to showcase the amazing achievements of individuals in Northern Ireland who put IT professionalism at the heart of everything they do.”

Simon Bailie, CEO of Digital DNA, reciprocated the sentiment, equally delighted to help shine a light on local IT talent. “We’re thrilled that the BCS IT Professional of the Year Awards will be taking place at Digital DNA this June. The eyes of the local tech scene will be on the nominees and the ultimate winners, making this a key component of this year’s event.

“We all know that Northern Ireland is home to some of the world’s top tech talent. Digital DNA’s flagship conference has become a melting pot for the sector and being able to shine a spotlight on our leading IT professionals is a fantastic addition to what is Northern Ireland’s biggest digital and technology event.”

Previous award winners include Allstate MD John Healy, Tourism NI’s Chief Digital Officer Dave Vincent, Cyphra Director Conrad Simpson, Eamonn O’Hare of Saint Malachy’s High School, and Kainos’ Kelly Moore.

BSC NI has confirmed that this year’s awards have once again received a substantial number of nominations, making the competition for the top spots in each category very strong indeed.

Follow BCS Northern Ireland @BCS_NI
Can you tell me a bit of background about Fathom and what services you offer?

I have always made my living from the internet. It was a great fortune in my life that I graduated in the mid-1990s just as the web was in its infancy. By coincidence I worked on the project team that delivered Ireland’s first online personal banking platform, AIB’s 24-houronline.ie. I experienced the highs and lows of the dot com boom and bust in the late 1990s and into the 2000s as I ran the largest web agency in Northern Ireland from 2002 to 2009, which we sold in 2008.

In the noughties, I grew a real interest in design performance. I found it intriguing that with the same ingredients (web design, programming, content management, hosting) some organisations enjoyed great success online while others never really got off the ground. I was really interested in the difference between those organisations:

- What did they talk about during projects?
- What mattered to them?
- How did they make design decisions?
- How did they win in crowded and competitive markets?

Time and time again, I came back to a simple truth – organisations that knew their customers best, valued their customer insights, and understood their customers’ motivations sold the most, saved the most, and won the most against competitors.

In the late noughties, a collective term for design performance started to become mainstream – the term was “UX” and it means the collection of skills and disciplines that lead to design performance. In September 2011 I decided to have the courage of my convictions to set up a dedicated UX agency – and Fathom was born.

Seven-and-a-half years later, we have a team of 12 and look after the UX needs of some of the most recognisable and growing brands in Ireland and the UK.

I’ve also invested in and been involved in other digital start-ups, some of which have been successful, others less so. If you look at my LinkedIn profile you’ll see my career has moved from glorious success to glorious success, but that’s just because I haven’t posted up the crushing failures.

What do your typical clients look like? Who benefits from your services?

The common thread between all of our clients is that they want to do better business by treating their customers better through digital products and service delivery. Because of this, we find that our customers come in all shapes in sizes and include large Enterprises (3 Mobile, AIB, Permanent TSB, Tesco Mobile), public bodies (Bord Bia, Tourism NI, PSNI), e-commerce businesses (Sliderobes, Vita Liberata, Chain Reaction Cycles), and digital product designers (DigitalPrinting.co.uk, Flender, BrainWaveBank). As an agency we love the variety this brings and feel that the breadth of work allows us to stay sharp and offer clients the best value.

Broadly, why is UX important for tech and IT companies developing products?

Across all digital sectors, the organisation that cares most about their users and includes them obsessively in the design process wins. Consider the world’s most famous digital brands – Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat, Google,
Spotify, Skype, YouTube – they all put the user at the centre of the design process. Or other organisations that have successfully incorporated digital into how they deliver experience – TED, Ryanair, Uber, The Guardian, BBC, Tesla – they all do design the same way. They start with the user and work backwards. Furthermore, they are obsessive about it: Culturally, they are sceptical of opinion and are constantly seeking to make design decisions based on insight.

It is possible for digital products to be both pretty and pretty awful at the same time. In the absence of user insight and a focus on solving user problems, designers leave themselves open to the danger of putting lipstick on a pig. The designer’s primary responsibility is to solve problems for their users and this simply isn’t possible without UX.

How do data analytics and research factor into your work? And what kinds of tools do you use?

Over half of everything we do at Fathom is research, both qualitative (searching for human insights) and quantitative (understanding data). And these two types of research need to be married to each other. Ultimately, we want to carry out research across two axes:

1. The qualitative / quantitative axis, allowing us to understand what is going on and why
2. The attitudinal / observational axis, allowing us to measure both behaviour and opinion

It is when we garner insights from across these that we can build up a really rich picture of how we can really solve user problems through beautiful digital products and services.

We use tools such as Silverback, Google Analytics, Hotjar, the Optimal Workshop suite and the Usability Hub suite. But more than anything, we like spending time with humans, asking them questions, getting their opinions, understanding their pain points, and observing them interacting with technology.

How can your services help tech start-ups in particular to develop their strategy?

It is absolutely imperative that every start-up, regardless of size, knows their customers intimately. 42% of start-ups that fail do so because there is no market demand – or to say that in UX-speak, the product is solving problems that users don’t have. UX thinking is so intrinsic to product success that Google Ventures (GV) insists that the businesses it invests in build product based on the principles of Lean UX. Briefly, these are:

- Early customer validation over releasing products with unknown end-user value
- Collaborative design over designing on an island
- Solving user problems over designing the next “cool” feature
- Measuring KPIs over undefined success metrics
- Applying appropriate tools over following a rigid plan
- Nimble design over heavy wireframes, comps or specs

These approaches are essential to give the product focus and clarity, and to mitigate risk.

Are there any technologies on the horizon that you think might benefit from your services and previous experience?

Two things intrigue me greatly about technical developments. Firstly, users frequently use technology in different ways than how it was designed. And secondly, they regularly use technology in a more selfish way than technologists predict.

As location services matured about a decade ago, the digital industry predicted that this would mean hyper-local, location-based notification marketing, alerting users as they walked down the street that they could enjoy discount in a nearby store. As it turns out, the biggest impact of technology in a retail environment is showrooming – checking out a product in store, and using 4G or in-store Wi-Fi to check the price online, and buy the product online if the price difference is great enough.

In other words, marketers thought the technology would give power to the retailer, but it ended up giving power to the customer.

For decades the buyer / seller balance of power has always been on the side of the seller because it was easy for companies with deep enough pockets to muscle their way to positive public perception. The internet has swung the power balance right in favour of the customer, and after decades of being lied to they are mad as hell and love their new-found power, based on easy access to knowledge.

While none of us can predict the future, one thing is certain: A key dynamic since the invention of the World Wide Web has been the power it has put back in the hands of the customer, and that seems certain to continue indefinitely. So, if you want to win with your digital product, put that empowered customer first, and all else will follow.
There is an ancient one-car garage on a leafy residential street in the town where I live.

It’s the spot where 80 years ago, a guy named David Packard and a guy named Bill Hewlett flipped a coin to decide the name of their new company. Hewlett won — and Hewlett-Packard was born.

That garage is now widely celebrated as the birthplace of Silicon Valley. It is both a monument and an inspiration to a culture that builds things, the symbolic centre of what followed — the microchip, the personal computer, the internet, the cloud, the iPhone, or Android, depending on your preference.

In Belfast, of course, there are reminders in the Titanic Quarter of the audacious building culture epitomised by the linen trade, rope manufacturers, whiskey distillers and shipbuilders like Harland & Wolff that date back to the 19th century. That early industrialisation, which included engineering and building the Titanic and its sister ships, gave way to today’s industries, which are focused on software, algorithms and artificial intelligence.

Since we started thinking about Belfast as a place where we want to create a substantial part of Signifyd’s future, the city’s industrial past and technological present have been front and centre in our thoughts.

Signifyd is a culture that builds things. We’ve pioneered an industry, helping online retailers provide their customers with a smooth buying experience, without the fear of being taken advantage of by bad actors.

But we’re just getting started. We need more smart people to continue with our accelerated global expansion and the expansion of the products and services we offer. When we started thinking about where in the world we would find those people, Belfast rose to the top of the list. We officially opened our Global R&D hub on High Street in February. Now we’re on a pace to hire 150 employees to advance our innovation as we empower retailers around the world.

So, why Belfast? Today, the hashtag #BuiltinBelfast is inspired by a vibrant innovation culture in Northern Ireland that has plenty in common with those who worked at the Harland & Wolff shipyards generations ago. Those innovative forerunners had the confidence and know-how to set about building the biggest moveable, human-built object the world had ever seen —
Deloitte Ireland’s Tech Fast 50 are from than a quarter of the companies in the according to Silicon Republic. More such events than just seven years ago, and hackathons — exponentially more innovation. There are tech meetups Belfast practically buzzes with Game of Thrones. headquarters for the wildly popular Studios and featuring HBO’s production has taken off, bolstered by Titanic intertwining with the new economy. Within the past decade, a media culture and big data support for Liberty Mutual and Liberty IT, which provides software companies whose success is steeped and development is also going on for companies whose success is steeped in technology — Allstate, Citigroup and Liberty IT, which provides software and big data support for Liberty Mutual Insurance. Within the past decade, a media culture intertwined with the new economy has taken off, bolstered by Titanic Studios and featuring HBO’s production headquarters for the wildly popular Game of Thrones. Belfast practically buzzes with innovation. There are tech meetups and hackathons — exponentially more such events than just seven years ago, according to Silicon Republic. More than a quarter of the companies in the Deloitte Ireland’s Tech Fast 50 are from Northern Ireland. The Financial Times recognized Belfast as one of the world’s top 10 Digital Economies of the Future. And like Signifyd, Belfast’s technology resurgence is just getting started.

No longer is Belfast’s primary tech role one of serving as a home to call centres and other operational functions for tech companies that are doing their innovating elsewhere. Belfast is no longer a city that sees its brightest residents leave to do their innovating in other parts of the world. The city is now a city of innovators inventing, designing and building the technology that is propelling companies forward. It is a city of innovative minds, innovative companies and innovative culture. That’s what we saw when we considered Belfast as the location for Signifyd’s research and development hub.

Silicon Valley, of course, is an unparalleled success story. The multitude of efforts to recreate it in different geographies have largely fallen short. But in Belfast, my co-founder Michael Liberty and I saw a number of the ingredients that fed into Silicon Valley’s trajectory. We were confident that if we combined Signifyd’s Silicon Valley DNA with Belfast’s building culture that we could create a world-class innovation engine. We also realised that Belfast had something else — something unique. It’s a city whose own story holds the narrative of what is needed to build an innovation culture — vision, industriousness, optimism, perseverance, purpose, and a grounding in reality combined with a willingness, when necessary, to disregard the constraints that being realistic brings. Think about it. Belfast went from being one of the leading industrial cities in the world in the early 20th century to suffering through civil conflict in the 1920s and being devastated by German bombers during World War II. In the second half of the century it watched its population dwindle, in part because of outmigration inspired by the sectarian violence known as the Troubles. But with the Good Friday agreement, the Troubles waned and Belfast picked up where it left off — and then some. The Titanic of the 21st century is technology. And Belfast, stocked with bright minds, rich culture, world-class universities and a growing population, has seized its opportunity.

We are pleased to have become a part of the city’s tech renaissance and we can hardly wait to see where it leads.

Signifyd breaks down Belfast’s unique proposition

**Top universities:*** Look no further than Queen’s University, a global leader in cybersecurity and home to the UK’s prestigious Centre for Secure Information Technologies, and Ulster University, with its world-renowned Computer Science Research Institute.

**Eager investors:** Belfast is the top investment location for U.S. cybersecurity development projects, according to FDi Intelligence, a foreign investment analytics organisation.

**Tolerance for failure:** The sinking of the Titanic a century ago was a terrible tragedy. But the scale of the vision and the scale of the engineering required to build and launch it was a triumph of the human spirit that serves as an inspiration for generations right up to today.

**Dissatisfaction with the status quo:** Belfast is teeming with thinkers and innovators who know there is a better way. We’ve run into them everywhere we turn in the city.

**Cooperation coexisting with competition:** Incubators like Ormeau Baths, the burgeoning meet-up and hackathon scene and a roster of hundreds of startups that allow for cross-pollination as workers move between jobs creates a culture of constant learning.

**Critical mass of skilled employees:** See top universities and hundreds of startups above.
Novosco works for many of Northern Ireland’s top 100 businesses as well as large health trusts, housing associations, and other organisations around the UK and Ireland. It uses innovative third-party platforms like ServiceNow to enhance the service it provides to customers.

In 2018 ServiceNow was voted the world’s most innovative company by Forbes, ahead of Tesla and Workday, with company revenues growing to more than $2.6 billion in 2018. The company is already established as the market leader in IT Service Desk and Service Management software and is making strong inroads into the HR and Customer Service Management segments with its Now platform. But it is the digital platform’s capability around rapid custom application development and modernisation of legacy applications that perhaps holds the greatest potential for growth.

ServiceNow’s core proposition is based around improving the customer experience – think customers making product or service enquiries; billing or payment enquiries; submitting claims; users logging IT faults or requests; employees interacting with HR or making a facilities management request. In addition to an intuitive self-service portal, the platform has strong AI, ML, workflow, and automation capabilities. ServiceNow also has its own app store that provides a list of certified third party applications and APIs to simplify integration.

Alan Stock, who heads up Novosco’s ServiceNow practice, explains how ServiceNow allows Novosco to deliver optimised IT managed services for enterprise clients.

Utilising emerging technology to improve the customer experience

Alan Stock, Major Deal Architect & Enterprise Services Lead, Novosco
The challenge in recent years for many organisations has been to adopt the technology and processes that enable them to rival the customer experience offered by consumer services like Uber and Monzu or many of the other new wave of digital banks – banks that are clearly underpinned by sophisticated digital platforms. In addition to a user-friendly portal interface, ServiceNow incorporates a range of AI and automation features to enable service providers to deliver a full digital experience to their customers without facing legacy technology challenges inherent in longer-established service providers.

After the initial interaction, AI-based intelligent routing applies to ensure that cases are categorised and routed quickly and accurately to the correct team for resolution or fulfilment. This helps to avoid one of the most common causes of customer dissatisfaction - where customers do not feel that issues have been resolved effectively.

This is often due to the fact that issues never make it beyond the initial customer service team. So, in addition to the intelligent routing of cases, ServiceNow also applies orchestration and automation capabilities to connect with other business systems, where necessary, to complete transactions in a single cycle.

One simple use case of how ServiceNow streamlines the provision of services is a request for onboarding a new employee in an organisation. The hiring manager starts by filling in the employee details on a self-service portal.

ServiceNow automatically suggests the team or function that the employee should belong to. From there, an automated workflow generates a user and email account for the employee, assigns the user account to the relevant security groups and grants access to permitted applications and systems.

In parallel, ServiceNow updates the employee details in the company HR and Payroll platforms to ensure that salary payments are made, tax details updated, benefits assigned, and an access pass requested. Approval cycles can be easily incorporated into this, and any other workflow.

An automated request can also be triggered to IT for the provision of a laptop, mobile phone, authentication token, and any other IT equipment required. When the employee’s IT equipment has been deployed, the hardware and software asset details are automatically assigned to the employee within ServiceNow. This means that for any interaction with the IT Service Desk, the relevant contextual information is available to analysts to accelerate the resolution of issues.

In large organisations this level of automation greatly reduces the lead time for onboarding and offboarding of employees while helping to maintain compliance and security standards.

Novosco utilises ServiceNow to deliver optimised IT managed services to clients across the UK and Ireland. It also provides consulting services to assist organisations in their implementation of ServiceNow including process design, licensing requirements, platform and data migration and ongoing configuration.
Leading businesses today, regardless of age, size or sector tend to be those who have an innovative culture and a start-up mentality. They are businesses which excel at bringing new ideas and services to the market, adapting quickly to the ever-changing demands of their customers and creating efficiencies which ultimately result in delivering growth and profitability.

Two local Bank of Ireland UK customers who understand the importance of innovation and ensure it is within the DNA of their business are The Vertigo Group and Mackle Petfoods. These businesses understand the importance of leading from the front, delivering innovative concepts, always looking ahead and embracing that innovative approach that helps to drive forward their growth ambitions.

The award-winning Vertigo Group is one of Northern Ireland’s leading entertainment and adventure companies who in little more than six years has earned a reputation as a pioneer that has brought something unique to the leisure and entertainment scene in Belfast.

Founded by Gareth and Lorna Murphy, the Group is behind some of the biggest, most innovative and fun ideas ever seen in Northern Ireland and indeed beyond.

The business was borne out of a desire to create attractions so compelling they would get kids motivated to step away from their screens and to enjoy being active with family and friends. Gareth also felt that there was real disconnect between the experiences that his kids had enjoyed elsewhere and those available here in Northern Ireland and he was determined to change that.

After establishing an indoor adventure and ski-centre in October 2013, the couple have since introduced and delivered a raft of firsts that demonstrate their commitment to bringing new ideas to the local market and delivering them in a highly professional and creative environment. In 2014, the Group opened Europe’s largest trampoline arena and subsequently followed it with the first and only indoor Skydiving Centre in Ireland and the first Ninja Master Course in Northern Ireland.

Gareth says: “We really enjoy sharing new attractions with people and bringing our vision for fun activities to life! We travel the world to find the next big thing.”

Despite high demand from customers it was a bold move to close and strip out the trampoline park and in just ten days replace it with the Group’s latest offering that opened earlier this year – the Inflata-Park. It is the only indoor inflatable action course on the island and is home to the likes of the...
Mechanical sweeper, the Travelator, and the Wipeout Assault Course!

“It’s important to us that our offering is exclusive, exciting, unique and pioneering. We saw the Inflata-Park concept in the US and we brought it back with us. We knew it would be a first here and we knew it would work well in the local market.”

Gareth puts his confidence down to his business model and those who help him to deliver it – his team.

He and his wife and co-founder Lorna foster a real team culture through training, incentives and a reward scheme to ensure everyone feels valued and delivers excellent customer service every time.

Gareth says: “I have a superb team of staff. I recruit for attitude and train from there. It was a young member of the team who is just 22 years old who was responsible for the delivery and installation of the Inflata-Park.

"Staff are instrumental to the success of the business so it’s important they are motivated and rewarded. Staff awards are given following nominations from customers, from fellow members of staff, management and mystery shoppers.”

Gareth recently took a group of six staff away on a ski-trip.

“We must be doing something right as we have loyal committed staff, many of whom have been with us from the start and are enjoying building their career with us.”

In 2018, the Group turned to Bank of Ireland UK as they were looking for a funder to support their ambitious investment programme.

Gareth says: “Eight months ago I was looking at the investments I wanted to make and I opened up our business and growth plans to the market. It was Bank of Ireland UK who got us. They had great confidence in our business plans and were refreshingly open and committed to what we wanted to achieve.

"Innovation and growth require significant capital and I need a bank that shares my vision and can be flexible as we adapt, develop and grow the business. Bank of Ireland supported us in re-financing elements of the business and fully funded the Inflata-Park which is already well ahead of our original forecast.

"Our ambitions extend beyond Northern Ireland. Customers travel from as far-a-field as Cork, Sligo and Scotland to enjoy the adrenaline filled fun concepts we have created so we know the demand is there.

"We are always looking ahead – to the next idea, the next big thing. We continually look for new ideas to enhance our customer offering and we have ambitions to develop further both locally and beyond Northern Ireland. We are already looking at several sites in the Republic as well as Great Britain.”

Kris Toner, Head of Mid-Corporate Business Banking Northern Ireland at Bank of Ireland UK says: “Gareth is incredibly entrepreneurial and is an outstanding business leader. At the Bank of Ireland UK sponsored Belfast Business Awards 2019 held in May and in front of a packed audience of many of Northern Ireland’s most talented and successful businesses, Gareth was named Business Person of the Year while Glen Stewart the companies Operations Manager was named Young Business Person of the Year.

“Both awards are recognition of the businesses continued success and Gareth’s passionate commitment to mentoring and developing the next generation of business leaders. When we first met, as well as requiring funding, the Group were also looking to establish a partnership as they embarked on their next phase of ambitious growth.

“One of our core objectives at Bank of Ireland is to help customers to begin their journey and to thrive and that can cover a variety of different things. It’s more than a funding transaction it’s about working together in understanding the business, their team and their ambition and not just about being profitable.

“We tailor our support and provide flexible funding and banking solutions to support our business customer’s individual needs. The Group has developed a real momentum within the business to stay ahead of the curve and deliver new and exciting concepts to market. The leisure sector and tourism more widely are booming here in Northern Ireland and it’s a huge growth area that’s largely undersupplied.

“At Bank of Ireland UK we are passionate about doing everything we can to help innovative businesses like this achieve their full growth potential and we look forward to supporting The Vertigo Group through their growth ambitions and continued success both here and further afield.”
Ambition, innovation and investment drive growth at Mackle Petfoods

Mackle Petfoods has come a long way since it was founded in Moy in 1971 with one brand and five employees. The company is now one of the leading pet food producers in the UK with an enviable reputation for innovation in product development and its finger on the pulse of market trends that has enabled it to grow into the multi-million-pound business it is today.

In fact, few pet food manufacturers are doing more to develop the growing pet food market, and the Tyrone based company is considered an industry pioneer that is helping to shape and transform the sector now and into the future.

Owner John Mackle says: “Mackle Petfoods is a dynamic forward-looking business. We listen to our customers and respond to market trends. We are constantly bringing new ideas and new products to the market and we can only do that with the clear understanding and full support of our funding partners at Bank of Ireland UK.

“Our relationship with the bank goes back a long way - they understand our business, where we have come from and crucially, where we are going.

“Bank of Ireland understands our commitment to drive growth through innovation and they support us with a range of flexible funding options whether it is commercial finance, working capital or long term loans to help fund capital expenditure.”

Madonna Daly, Business Manager, Bank of Ireland UK says: “We have a very exciting and highly successful partnership with Mackle Petfoods. It is a constantly changing business and we are proud to have supported John and his team through phenomenal growth and we continue to support the business as they invest in R&D to grow product ranges, to innovate with new recyclable packaging and to enhance capacity through their state of the art, high speed automation production facility.

“We enjoy a very open dialogue with the business, we understand their strategy, we fully support their investment decisions and we are proud to be their banker.”

While the Tyrone based company has been successfully manufacturing high quality pet food for more than 45 years, it was the launch of their premium pet food brand Naturo in 2010, with its 100% natural ingredients, that propelled the business to the forefront of the industry.

Naturo was the brainchild of John Mackle who makes it his business to hone-in on and exploit market trends.
Natural ingredients, good health and the ‘humanisation’ of pets by their owners are all trends Naturo have adopted. With beloved pets increasingly seen as one of the family, owners want to feed them with a high-quality premium food that is made with natural, fresh and locally sourced ingredients. Naturo was developed to meet this demand and is distinguished from competitors by the high proportion of premium animal proteins that come from animals fit for human consumption.

Natro was launched via their online shop, trade fairs and consumer shows – the latter two vital for engaging with customers and getting their feedback.

John says the business’s big break came when they began supplying 250 Tesco stores with just six products from the Naturo range. After the brand proved itself to be popular with customers, the supermarket rolled out the new premium brand to a further 600 stores over the following twelve months.

To meet increased demand the business invested £3.5m in a state-of-the-art packing and distribution centre located close to the main production site. Specific to the production of cat and dog food in plastic trays, investment of over £6m has been made in extending the building, upgrading the raw material intake area, installing new production equipment, automation of the production process with robotics and automation of packing from slewing to palletisation.

With additional capacity secured, Mackle Petfoods decided the time was right to explore the export market.

John says: “When we began looking into exports, it was reassuring to be able to draw upon the expertise of the bank’s Global Markets team who advised us on foreign exchange and international trade finance which was invaluable.”

The business first secured a listing in Dutch supermarket Albert Heijn and have never looked back. Business has grown year on year and Naturo is now widely available in specialist pet stores in a further 12 countries including Poland, Spain, Italy, Croatia, Lithuania and Greece. Naturo’s most recent export successes have been in gaining distribution in Portugal’s biggest supermarket chain Continente and it can now be bought as far away from its birthplace as South Korea.

To continue the pace of growth and expansion John works tirelessly with the New Product Development Team to take innovative concepts and to see how they can be incorporated into products to deliver health advantages to pets.

Naturo’s successful launch coincided with an ever-increasing number of owners reporting on sensitive dogs requiring specialist dietary requirements which led Mackles to develop a full range of grain-free products.

John says: “To share some insight into the scale of our product development and investment in growth, since Naturo launched the range has grown from 4 to 29 products – the result of constant innovation and R&D in response to customer feedback and market trends.”

Last year the company launched a brand–new range called Naturo Chef’s Selection. The new products retained the Naturo principles of quality, natural and healthy ingredients but were also enhanced with superfoods that customers recognize as having additional nutritional benefits for their pets such as Apple Cider Vinegar which is known to be good for the skin and coat.

John says: “Just a few short years ago it would have been unimaginable that our pets would be enjoying food packed with such gourmet ingredients as goji berries, quinoa and kale but that’s exactly what we have brought to the market.”

The business remains in growth, producing over 30 million units of Naturo annually, supplying all the major supermarkets including Tesco, Sainsbury’s, Morrison’s, Asda, Supervalu and Dunnes as well as independents such as Eurospar and Nisa and pet specialists.

While enjoying such success, John continues to work hard to keep improving, challenging and developing the business he took on from his father more than twenty years ago. John strives to ensure this independent family owned business maintains its strong family ethos and is proud to have third and fourth generations of local families working with them.

Although the business has invested heavily in automation, people remain the most important asset to the company, demonstrated through the swelling number of employees which is now well in excess of 200.

Looking to the future, John insists there is still a lot more to be achieved.

Mackle Petfoods will continue to focus on quality and to further develop innovative natural, healthy pet food products. Online sales represent just a small percentage of the business yet offer a huge potential for growth and so a re-launch of the website is a focus for 2020 along with the development of a specialist puppy range, expansion into dry dog food and entering new export markets.

John says: “We are fortunate in having the support of Bank of Ireland UK as we continue to develop and grow as a business. The bank is an extension of our team and they are integral to our success and we’re delighted to have them walk alongside us as we work to bring our philosophy to promote overall pet health through providing a brand which is accessible to the masses.”
Having fallen into programming because of his adaptability and love of mathematics, Marron explained that there were few roles in LIT that he hadn’t filled on his climb up the ladder to his current role leading all things innovation.

His talented team tackles the toughest business problems for the Liberty Mutual family and is moving from strength to strength.

“As part of Liberty, we sell next-to-no products, so we like to think of ourselves as Liberty’s best-kept secret -- Belfast’s best kept secret -- because we have one customer - our parent company Liberty Mutual Insurance. People don’t traditionally think about us as working on really cool challenging problems and working on emerging technologies.”

Digital DNA has become a cornerstone of the NI tech scene, and Liberty IT is an event sponsor this year. Marron is introducing a series of lightning talks from his team members and was keen to make the LIT innovation pipeline clear to the DDNA audience.

“We thought we would take a slightly different approach this year at Digital DNA. Lightning talks are very important here locally in Liberty IT, and it also gives us an excuse to do two things: Get lots of our people up talking (which is great for us); and showcase our innovation process. Contrary to popular belief, it is really structured, very disciplined, and a lot of hard work! We have some really incredible talent doing some really wonderful things, and it’s a chance for them to share their story too.

“We are going to have one of our youngest team members, Ovi starting off the first talk, and they are going to be focused on ideation. This is the really early stage for us where we would run lots of ideation sessions and workshops with business and IT partners to explore different problems, challenges, and opportunities. After the ideation phase then we will typically move into the Proof of Concept or Proof of Technology...
 phase. At that phase we are going to have Nikita talk about an idea -- a PoC -- that she has been working on. "We are then going to have Chris, one of our engineers, talk about his experience of bringing something from that PoC stage into the MVP stage, which again is a very powerful story. For the last part of the process we are going to have Andrew and Steven talk about taking a product into production, which is the end phase."

When we conjure up an idea of what innovation looks like, we tend to think of emerging technology and cutting-edge engineering. Marron explained that three areas of his team come together to ensure their innovative solutions don’t cross the line into bleeding edge: He was keen to explain that it takes more than just the flashiest toolsets and an amazing dev team to make a logical, leading solution to modern business problems.

“We have three distinct areas of the team”, Marron explained. “We have a team of experts focused on building business relationships since Liberty has 50,000 people worldwide and most of them are not technology individuals. We have a team who have very wide networks and are specialists on the business transformation to bridge that gap between our technologists and the wider business. They have a lot of experience partnering with different parts of the business and finding some of their really challenging problem areas, and they heavily leverage all of the teams and the leaders that we have right across LIT to do that.

“Our second team, the emerging technology team, is probably the one that people are most familiar with and think about immediately. We have a bunch of very talented engineers who are really creative and work on the ideation phase about the rapid prototyping, trialling, and testing -- all of the things you would associate with design thinking and that side of the lifecycle -- and others who are experts at consuming and understanding new technologies and using them to build solutions very quickly."

“The last section of our innovation team is our consultants: the people who are experts on the ways of working, the methodologies, and the practices. There is no point having expert engineers if you don’t have people who can talk with business customers, understand the problem, and guide them through the whole process, and this is something we really focus a lot on.”

The Belfast team isn’t unique in providing business and technological innovations within the Liberty umbrella, but the engineering excellence established early-on makes our local talent a key piece of the global LIT and Liberty Mutual innovation strategy. Marron pointed to the fostering of this engineering excellence culture as the reason for their great success on the wider stage.

“Liberty is a really large organisation and as you would expect there is business innovation and technology innovation teams all over the globe, but we have actually got to the point now where we are sort of the central organisation that is pulling all the different groups together. We are able to start looking at some of the themes that you can see across the business and use the solutions that we are building potentially for multiple parts of the business, so we are at the point now where we don’t need to sell our services and it’s great for us.”

“We talked a lot about the process, customer engagement, and ideas, but none of that is possible without a really deep engineering culture. We talk a lot to a load of local companies about how you get started in innovation and people sometimes default to the process and the ideas and building things, getting things out there, but it’s not sustainable unless you have a really deep engineer culture, people who are really proud of the engineer excellence in your company. That’s the foundation, so we need that in place before anything else is possible and it’s the most important thing."

“It’s really important for us to allow our engineers to go out and share their stories. It drives pride for them because they are showcasing some of the really cool things they are doing. I can’t stress this enough: They excel not just on a local stage in NI, UK, and Ireland; it’s on a global stage. We have engineers who are coming up with concepts and technologies and solving problems that are being pointed out on the global stage, so it’s really important for us to showcase the local talent that we have here in LIT. We love to let the people here in NI know it’s possible and you can actually play from an innovation perspective on that global stage right here at Liberty.”
Startups find room to grow at Danske Bank’s city centre hub

The Catalyst Belfast Fintech Hub has become home to some of Northern Ireland’s most exciting new tech and digital startups. Here Sync NI profiles three companies at different stages of development.

It is a little over nine months since Danske Bank and Catalyst opened the Catalyst Belfast Fintech Hub, a co-working space for Northern Ireland’s digital and fintech startups.

In that time, the Hub has become a thriving city centre location where tech entrepreneurs are meeting, learning and availing of the resources on offer from the two lead partners on the project.

While it is undoubtedly a great workspace, it is the entrepreneurs and company founders in the Catalyst Belfast Fintech Hub who make it what it is, so what better way to get a feel for the place than to hear some of their stories?

Daniel McGlade, Oroson

The company’s goal is to save organisations time by changing the way that teams work together online and it has timed its entry into the market right at a time when there’s a wave of interest in flexible working across multiple industries.

Daniel explains that Oroson has pivoted away from its initial target sector, higher education, to the corporate market after realising its product had far wider appeal.

Daniel sees any sector suffering from “information overload” as a potential target. Today it has customers in the professional services sector as well as the likes of the IFA, Boojum, Mirror Media, Sport NI and some of the big four consulting firms. While mainly in the UK, being a cloud-based solution, Oroson has users from “Panama to Canada”.

“There has been a massive trend for remote working and that provides a great opportunity for us to solve the problem it creates. A number of businesses are increasing the use of mobile offices and migrating to the cloud as their teams work in different locations outside of a central office,” he says.

“The creation of spaces like Catalyst Belfast Fintech Hub at Danske Bank illustrates how work is changing. Traditional office spaces are outdated for many organisations but it can be hard for them to move to more flexible arrangements. We are providing a digital solution to that problem and we’re using our own product to operate that way ourselves. The Hub provides a perfect support and resource for us as we’re able to use it when we bring the whole team together.”

The company has already completed a £1.2m funding round and is about to close another £1.2m round, with plans in place to undertake a series A-round of £5m in the very near future.

“Our customer numbers are steadily growing and we are getting a lot of organic growth from customer referrals. The business is in good shape.”

Jess Dornan Lynas, Afterbook

Digital platform Afterbook was born out of Jess Dornan Lynas’ own experience of losing her mother when she was just 19 and her determination to keep alive her mum’s memory, both for
herself and her children. In only a short time it has amassed over 1000 users in 62 countries, with the US and the UK & Ireland accounting for 35% each of the user base.

“We want to enable people around the world to tell their life stories and the life stories of their loved ones in a sensitive and lovely way,” says Jess.

“I founded Afterbook with my own experience at the core - dealing with bereavement and grief and wanting to honour mum. But it also made me realise the fragility of life and the need to chronicle life for our kids. Not in a morbid or maudlin way; in a celebratory way. Today, people only start writing content when they’ve had a diagnosis, as we saw recently with the journalist Rachael Bland.”

Jess came to the Catalyst Belfast Fintech Hub after winning a desk space through the ‘TechStars’ competition organised by Danske Bank and Women in Business.

“As well as being a great space for meeting potential investors and our own team, the Hub has opened up a brilliant network and I’ve found everyone really helpful. As a business that is trying to create a community of people who are talking about their experiences, it has been really useful to come into a place where people all have their own creative endeavours going on.”

Jess believes there is definitely a market for Afterbook and she has recently launched a crowdfunding campaign on the Indiegogo platform. It is, she says, an opportunity for people to be engaged and involved in shaping the future of the platform as they build their team.

Jess is also working on a B2B model and sees potential partnerships with businesses like funeral directors, life insurers, the education sector, and corporates, offering a tangible and valued service.

In the short-term though, she’s targeting the consumer market.

“We want to offer everyone the opportunity to write their own story, to prompt them to journal as they go in a dedicated space. That’s starting to happen on social media, but those platforms are not a dedicated and respectful platform for that purpose. Afterbook exists for the story of your life, your own personal narrative.”

Gavin Shields, YOMO

YOMO has developed a number of products since being founded by Gavin Shields and his three co-founders five years ago. It started with a simple savings app called PiggyPot that predated the rise of online challenger banks like Starling and Monzo, when online investment apps were very new. When those banks began to take over the market Gavin moved on to other products they don’t provide.

Currently the business is working on a new high-return investment product that will be delivered direct to the consumer. Offering higher interest rates, Gavin believes the product will be popular.

With a background in tech and finance as both founder and investor, Gavin knows it is important to be nimble and keep developing YOMO’s offering. “When we launched our first product there was a big opportunity to innovate more quickly than the traditional banks, but now we’re innovating alongside some very strong competitors. It is possible, but it’s hard to do outside London’s financial centre and it takes a lot of investment,” he explains.

“So from Belfast that means we need a niche. We need to pick smaller groups of customers and do what we do really well, better than the others.”

The business is currently looking to invest in marketing to grow its user base and is focused on developing new products that sit on top of standard savings.

“We want to get people to do more with their cash and to make it more appealing to save in the first place,” he says.

“We’re searching for a scalable, repeatable business model that will enable us to launch new products that provide people, and the company, with a new way to make money.”

Gavin says he too has benefited from the environment at Catalyst Belfast Fintech Hub.

“It is a great workspace with a nice atmosphere. Both Catalyst and Danske Bank have been very positive about what we’re doing and helped make some useful introductions.”

Want to join?

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Busting blockchain myths at Rakuten Blockchain Lab

Sync NI’s Brendan Drain interviewed Mark McKillion, Senior Software Engineer at Rakuten’s Belfast-based Blockchain Lab, to discover more about working with blockchain and the massive innovative scope granted to Rakuten by the technology.

“You know the saying ‘time flies when you’re having fun’? Well it really does!”

“I have been in the IT industry for the past six years after graduating from University of Ulster with first-class honours. I started out in CVS Caremark as a graduate — and also worked with Rapid7 and Total Mobile — before taking up my current role here in Rakuten. In my previous roles I gained experience in IoT, cyber security, and healthcare, however I had not worked with blockchain until I joined the lab.”

McKillion’s day-to-day tasks are varied and interesting, something he was sure to make clear during the interview.

In the same day, he can go from analysing requirements for a new project solution to building out and improving Rakuten’s current microservice infrastructure using Docker, Kubernetes, and Azure. The Belfast team rapidly adapts to trends in emerging tech and isn’t afraid to switch up its stack or methodology to create the best solutions.

“The main goal of the lab is to develop APIs on top of different public and private blockchains so that Rakuten business and technology teams can take advantage of blockchain without having to understand the complexities”, McKillion explained. “Rakuten is a large company with over 20,000 employees that has been around for over 20 years.

“Before joining Rakuten, I only knew it as the shirt sponsor...”
of FC Barcelona and had no real idea what it does. The company started in 1997 as a Japanese ecommerce company but it has become so much more than that, with services available in a number of different industries across the globe, from online video streaming with Rakuten TV, messaging with Rakuten Viber, and online reading with Rakuten Kobo.”

McKillion was keen to dispel the myth that blockchain and cryptocurrencies are one and the same, especially since the two terms seemingly go hand in hand in mainstream media.

Understanding the wider implications of blockchain, he explained, is key to fully exploiting the technology’s full potential.

“It is important to separate cryptocurrencies from blockchain technology as their futures are not necessarily intertwined. Cryptocurrencies are made possible as a result of blockchain technology, but the opportunities for blockchain go way beyond cryptocurrencies. I recently attended the Dublin Tech Summit, where around a third of the content was about blockchain and companies beginning to use the technology for a wide range of different use cases. Bitcoin introduced blockchain technology to the world back in 2009, but it has come a long way since then and it continues to grow.”

Rakuten’s Blockchain Lab opened in August 2016 with three employees and has since grown to 16 engineers with a plan to be at 20+ by the end of the year. McKillion gave an excellent overview of his current projects and the skills needed to make a splash within such a reactive, trailblazing area of development.

“Currently we are working on a digital asset exchange called Rakuten Wallet, which is due to be launched in Japan later this year. It has already had a lot of press coverage and the application will enable Rakuten customers to buy cryptocurrencies through a company that they trust, which has the potential to be a game changer in the cryptocurrency space. In the blockchain lab we have built the backend services for this exchange, which has involved learning how the various cryptocurrencies work and how to integrate with the associated public blockchains.

“"It has been a steep learning curve for me as I had no previous experience working with blockchain technologies. However, the people in the office are very knowledgeable and approachable, which makes for a great working environment”

Perhaps one of the most surprising discoveries to come from the interview was that much of the tech stack used by the Rakuten team is reassuringly familiar to those who work in modern web development.

“There are lots of different blockchain protocols and platforms now and part of the challenge is deciding which one best meets the requirement”, McKillion continued. “We use the latest cloud technologies such as Docker and Kubernetes, and all of our microservices are deployed in the cloud using Azure. I had dabbled with this type of technology before and it is very interesting coming into a job where the latest technologies are used”

The nature of cutting-edge development such as that conducted by Rakuten’s blockchain lab means that on-the-job training and continual development is a must. Just as the solutions created are dynamic and inherently practical, McKillion described the development process as flexible and hands-on.

“The approach to training and development is based on how individuals learn best. On-the-job training and learning from others is in my opinion one of the most effective methods. We also have access to online tutorials and whatever books we need. Members of the team stay up-to-date with what is happening across the blockchain and wider technology space by attending conferences such as Kubecon, Microsoft Build, Consensus, and Devcon (Ethereum).”

To end the interview, McKillion gave some expert insight into the future of blockchain and explained its advantages as a field of interest for truly brilliant software engineers who wish to work in the most disruptive new IT career on the 2019 jobs market.

“All of the major cloud providers are offering BaaS (blockchain as a service) now and every day we see more and more big companies making press releases about blockchain projects they are working on. It is extremely difficult to predict the future of blockchain technology, but maturity of the tooling and adoption by large organisations is sending a message that it is here to stay. I believe that all businesses should be exploring the disruptive potential of the technology.”

In December, LinkedIn described the job position of blockchain developer as the number-one emerging job and said the number of positions open had grown 33-fold over 2018. There are not many opportunities in Belfast to experience working on this technology, so seize your chance.

“Right now, we have a number of open software engineering vacancies in the Blockchain Lab and we want to hear from people who are keen to embrace this emerging technology and are not afraid to get involved in all aspects of the software development lifecycle. The reward is a really interesting job where you learn in a challenging but supported environment and have an opportunity to work on some of Rakuten’s most strategic products.”
Kainos working on innovative VR experiences

Sync NI’s Brendan Drain had a go at Kainos’ innovative VR experience DragonSlumber, part of the NI Science Festival. Here he shares his thoughts on what makes for an excellent VR experience and why Kainos is the place to be for those who wish to work in the VR space.

Did you know that Kainos has a virtual reality department? I was surprised recently to find out that the company has not only been developing VR experiences, but has really been innovating in virtual space.

Belfast-based software development firm Kainos is best known for its IT and consulting services offered to businesses, but it turns out that it’s also got a team working on innovative VR experiences. The group recently partnered with local artist PJ Holden to create an amazing VR experience for Key Stage 2 students as part of the NI Science Festival, which was on display at Belfast’s W5 Science Park.

A sneak peek at DragonSlumber
I went down to W5 to get a sneak peek of the DragonSlumber adventure experience and was thoroughly impressed with both the artistry that went into creating the experience and the technical innovation from the development side. The demo room is an open space strewn with chairs and tape markers on the floor, but put on the VR headset and you’ll find yourself on a winding rock ledge suspended over an active volcano.

While many VR experiences are simple seated demos in a small virtual space, DragonSlumber fills the entire room. A backpack that the instructor delightfully describes to kids as “your battle armour” turns the VR headset into an untethered experience, and you walk around the room like you’re in your own little holodeck.

Though you know that you’re standing on a solid floor, you can’t help but look down over the edge of the thin virtual ledge and feel like one misstep and you’d fall. The illusion of perspective and scale really worked, and I carefully edged along the rock ledge laid out in front of me and at one point almost held out my hands to keep my balance.

VR for games and experiences
Coming from a background in gaming journalism, I’ve played countless VR experiences at events over the years and have seen the technology mature from a stationary seated experience to the immersion of room-scale VR demos. Though the games industry has had a shaky start with VR, the potential for VR to immerse someone in a virtual world makes it an incredibly powerful tool to deliver unique experiences -- even more powerful in that regard than films.

As a game developer myself, I know that creating all of this was no small technical feat, and Kainos is keen to highlight it as the largest VR experience built in Northern Ireland. The event fills a 15 x 12m space, but projects a much larger world beyond the walking area to make you feel like you’re in a land of giants and dragons. The experience was created by Kainos in collaboration with Digital Catapult NI and comic artist PJ Holden.

PJ Holden told me about the difficulties in creating a huge virtual environment within a small space, highlighting the fact that establishing a one-to-one scale between a real world and virtual environment is a lot trickier than it sounds. Holden himself comes from an IT background and is quite tech-savvy, and actually built the entire experience within VR using painting and sculpting tools combined with some traditional 3D modelling. The end result is a magical blend of comic artistry and visual spectacle that speaks as much to the skill of the artist as to the amazing technology involved.
**Kainos does VR**
The biggest take-away from the event for me was the surprising fact that Kainos does VR, and does it well. I spoke to one developer at Kainos at length about the technology involved, the problems they’ve solved, and the things they’ve learned throughout the project. He was aware of the current research in the field and had some new insights to share about where VR is headed.

It was clear that the developers involved had real passion for VR and felt Kainos was a company that allowed them to pursue that interest. It will be interesting to see whether this event serves as a proof-of-concept for further development, and whether Kainos continues to push the envelope in the emerging VR experience industry.

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Thinking about emerging technology applications within the workspace is a scary proposition for some.

Real concerns about abstracting away meaningful work from real people and rerouting it to the robots blend with the threat of your personal skillset being rapidly outpaced by modern developments to make for a trying time in the world of work in 2019. The robots are well and truly set to take over, right?

Not so, according to AI enthusiast and HR Business Partner at Ulster Bank Sandra Wright. In her rapid-fire discussion on implementing a chat bot into her company HR workflow, Sandra was keen to allay fears about AI implementations within the HR function.

“So what can Archie do? In people services, we get hundreds of queries a day; many of which are low complexity and high volume,” said Wright. “This is where Archie comes in. When we started, he handled about 80 queries, and now he can handle over 700 query journeys, from question-and-answer to complex conversations.

“He offers our colleagues 24/7 fast and efficient advice. For our advisors, he takes a chunk of the simple, monotonous queries from their work stack and allows them to focus on the value-add complex stuff. He handles about 400 queries a day, containing about half and handing the other half off to an advisor. He can handle multiple queries at the same time and he’s always learning.

“So what about those jobs then? So far, we actually haven’t had a reduction of roles as a direct consequence of introducing Archie, but what we have seen is that HRBPs and our advisors are focused on those higher value-add complex queries. He’s actually brought in new roles to HR: we’ve got a lead digital customer journey manager, and assistant journey manager, a content manager, two conversation analysts, and of course, Archie himself. These roles didn’t exist 18 months ago. The future isn’t all robots... it’s humans and robots working together.”
VR and AR is a huge area of development that is well explored within the entertainment sector, but its uses are even more impactful when it comes to training and HR applications.

Sentireal’s David Trainor helped bring the concept to life at Disrupt HR through his presentation, which explored how VR and AR can provide an amazing practice and training ground for HR professionals. On top of the fantastic presentation, David brought along some tech so attendees could experience his work for themselves, which created quite the buzz during the intermission.

“I train people in VR,” said Trainor. “One aspect is the level of engagement people have with the training. VR is multi-sensory… it is your experience. People engage with that material more than through other media. That helps them develop skills both at a fast rate -- sometimes up to twice as fast -- but also increases our average level to which skills reach when compared to other training delivery mechanisms. That in turn then leads to a greater degree of knowledge retention: We measure up to a 70% improvement.

"VR has become a mature useable medium alongside print, video and the other forms of digital communications. It’s something now that has become effective for a number of business areas, particularly learning and development, and I would challenge you to value it in your organisation and see how you might make use of it."

One of the most popular talks of the night was presented by Glaze Digital’s Jamie Gordon, a talented Ulster University Marketing student who is on his placement year. Jamie did his best to answer one of the most topical questions in HR: How can companies best appeal to Gen-Z, and does technology factor in their career decisions?

“Reverse mentoring is something that is very common,” said Gordan. “O2 in particular has done this: Senior people often come to younger people and say ‘what can we do? How can we drive things? How can we make the workplace better for you?’, and that is something that I have experienced in my placements so far. For me as a young person, flexibility is really important. Young people want to be treated like an adult… people want to be treated like they can manage their own time, they are able to be committed to their job and make sure they slot everything in, in the day and the time required.”

It turns out that attracting Gen-Z is as simple – or as difficult, depending on how you see it – as ensuring your new prospects that communication, supportive learning opportunities, and trusting your talent without judgement or restriction are all high on your HR priority list. Jamie explained that asynchronous communication methods and modern remote working applications can certainly help tick those boxes, but that fancy perks and other fads take a backseat to reactive training opportunities and genuine mentorship.

“While the other speakers didn’t focus on emerging technology or helping the digital generation come into the workforce, everyone presented a truly disruptive idea during their five minutes of fame.

Axiom Law’s Davy McAlinden discussed how to measure leadership; Sinead Carville, Executive Director of HR at FinTru, talked about how branding is a united HR and marketing effort; Glenda Nelson of LHH Penna brought research surrounding nurturing female leaders to the fore; Philip Brady shared his thoughts on campaign uptake with us; Jim Berrisford revealed how to get the best out of recruitment firms; Catalyst Inc’s Shauna Collins took us on a journey to Mars that looked at letting heroes lead the way; and Paul Furey let the HR professionals in the room know which wasteful HR practices they need to ditch and why.

Each speaker’s five minutes was captured on video and can be found on the Disrupt HR website.
When it comes to education, Diane Morrow and Michael O’Hara are a real dynamic duo. The pair founded the mTech.Academy scheme in order to deliver experiential learning to school-aged students by engaging them heavily in technology.

The academy partners with schools across Northern Ireland and recently led a group of students to the Mobile World Congress tech event in Barcelona. Sync NI’s Brendan Drain caught up with Diane and Michael to find out more about the scheme and their successful trip to Mobile World Congress in February.

For those who don’t know, how did the mTech.Academy get started and what has your involvement been like?

Diane Morrow: My background is in education – I was a teacher for more than a decade and then moved to Catalyst Inc., where I led the Generation Innovation programme, focusing on collaborative education for 14–19-year-olds. While at Catalyst, I had the chance to see Michael O’Hara present at the 2017 Digital DNA conference – he’s spent 30 years working for leading global technology companies, most recently as the Chief Marketing Officer for the GSMA, which is the trade body representing the world’s mobile ecosystem. The GSMA also organises Mobile World Congress (MWC), the world’s leading tech showcase. Michael gave a great view of the technology trends shaping our future and I immediately thought it would be fantastic if Northern Ireland students had the opportunity to see this in person at MWC.

Michael O’Hara: We realised there was a gap in the Northern Ireland education system, similar to that facing many other countries – students are learning to pass exams, not to develop the real-world skills they will need to thrive in this new digital world. We also saw that shifts in technology – the move to ultra-fast 5G networks, the rapid proliferation of the Internet of Things and the growing adoption of artificial intelligence, to name just three trends – are creating a new industrial revolution, one that today’s students are not currently well-equipped to compete in. Mtech.Academy combines hands-on experiential learning and exposure to leading-edge technology to prepare students, teachers and employers for this new world of work.

Michael and I kicked off a pilot programme, where I brought 11 students from St. Ronan’s College to the 2018 MWC, so they could experience this amazing technology first-hand and also to gain a better understanding of what technology and business could mean to them in their future careers. It turns out it had a major impact – eight of the 11 students actually changed their GCSE subjects after this experience, to more technology- and business-focused topics. Following the success of that pilot and after consultation with educators and industry stakeholders in Northern Ireland, we made the decision to formally launch mTech.Academy – we introduced the company at Digital DNA in June 2018 and then unveiled the Year 1 programme and partners in September 2018.

Since then, we’ve been working with 300 students and 70 teachers and head teachers from 10 schools across Northern Ireland, and it’s culminating with the trip to MWC19 Barcelona. It’s been an amazing experience and quite unique – we’ve had such strong engagement at all levels in the schools, and we also have such strong support and commitment from industry, with partners including PwC, Grant Thornton, BT, Dawson Andrews, Instil, Novosco and Smiley Monroe.

The mTech.Academy philosophy is all about experiential learning. How does that differ from the standard curriculum you’d normally see in secondary level education?

Michael O’Hara: We realised there was a gap in the Northern Ireland education system, similar to that facing many other countries – students are learning to pass exams, not to develop the real-world skills they will need to thrive in this new digital world. We also saw that shifts in technology – the move to ultra-fast 5G networks, the rapid proliferation of the Internet of Things and the growing adoption of artificial intelligence, to name just three trends – are creating a new industrial revolution, one that today’s students are not currently well-equipped to compete in. Mtech.Academy combines hands-on experiential learning and exposure to leading-edge technology to prepare students, teachers and employers for this new world of work.

For instance, as their “signature” student project this year, the students have been working on a Smart Cities Challenge. Over six months, they researched smart cities and developing solutions that they believe will benefit their communities, with the strong support from local industry. At MWC, 10
teams of students presented their smart cities visions, outlining how they will use technology to tackle a wide range of real-world issues, many of which SBRI Belfast City are working on. Their proposals demonstrate how smart city services will help decrease traffic congestion, create new transport options, improve waste management, monitor crime, make street lighting more efficient, improve student travel safety, decrease carbon emissions and give citizens new ways to communicate with their council.

The academy now represents around 300 students across 10 schools in Northern Ireland. What kind of impact have you noticed in those schools?

DM: The feedback from the students, teachers, and head teachers has been phenomenal. It’s been really empowering for the students – a great example is their use of Google Drive to help them share information, collaborate on projects, and communicate outside of the class. They have adopted the technology enthusiastically, collaborating as a team, in the evenings and the weekends, with no prompting from teachers.

The teachers and head teachers really value the continuing professional development that they are getting through our partners PwC and Grant Thornton, gaining new perspectives from outside of the education sector and learning more about what employers are seeking in the future workforce.

I’ve really enjoyed seeing how mTech. Academy has opened the students’ eyes as to the career opportunities enabled by technology – it’s not just coding or being an engineer. I’ve had students share with me how mTech. Academy has helped build their confidence, encouraged their creativity and developed their communications skills.

What made you choose the Mobile World Congress event for the 2018 student trip, and are you considering expanding to other tech events?

MO'H: As I led marketing for the GSMA, the organisation that puts on MWC, it was the logical choice for us. MWC is the world’s leading tech showcase, with more than 107,000 attendees and 2,400-plus companies across the mobile ecosystem participating – there are not many other places where you can see all of the technologies, products and services that are shaping our future in one place. The students get the chance to see everything from new 5G handsets to AI, the Internet of Things to AR/VR, connected cars to robots, drones and much more. MWC truly is a unique experience, but we’ll also keep our eyes open to other opportunities for the students.

The scheme has been running for some time now, do you think it’s changing attitudes toward tech from teachers?

DM: Yes, though I will say that the teachers that we’ve been working with have embraced technology right from the start. The students are using Google Drive and Google Classroom as part of their everyday work in mTech Academy and it’s changed how they interact with each other, how they share information – they are actively taking the initiative, working outside of school hours, through these tools. We’ve also introduced some new technologies for teachers, with collaboration tools such as Trello. And of course, the students and teachers have been learning as they’ve researched mobile technology and the Internet of Things as part of the Smart Cities Challenge. It’s been a great process to be involved with, to see this evolution.

Automation, AI, and emerging tech are rapidly transforming the future of work. Where do you see this ending up and what might the job market look like for today’s school-aged children when they enter the world of work?

MO'H: Technology such as AI and robots will increasingly replace repetitive roles across both blue-collar and white-collar segments; it is anticipated that up to 20 per cent of current jobs will be eliminated by the end of the 2020s, so the world of work will look very different in the coming years.

It is important to remember that technology eliminates jobs – not work. We have consistently seen in industrial development that as machines become more capable, humans move on to new roles that require a different skillset. This constant displacement and replacement are signs of a healthy and dynamic economy.

Even with advances in technology, it is likely that humans will continue to outperform machines in areas that require creativity, critical thinking, collaboration and communication. However, we currently have a workforce that is not adequately prepared to compete in this new digital world. It is absolutely essential that we develop education policies and programmes – at scale – that will raise the current and future workforce above the capabilities of computers and equip them with the skills they need to not only survive but thrive in the digital workplace.

If someone out there represents an NI school, is there a way that they can get involved?

DM: Yes, absolutely – we are in the process of planning for the Year 2 programme for mTech. Academy and we’re looking to expand the number of schools that we are working with in the next year.

We’ve had tremendous interest from additional schools already, but we certainly want to hear from any schools that would like to get involved – please reach out to us at info@mtech.academy.
Upcoming Events

Women Tech Space evening event
WHEN 24th June 2019
WHERE Linenhall St, Belfast

Women who shape Northern Ireland
WHEN 25th June 2019
WHERE Bedford St, Belfast

Domain Specific Languages and Coroutines in Anger
WHEN 25th June 2019
WHERE Adelaide St, Belfast

4IRC: water security
WHEN 25th June 2019
WHERE Donegall Square West, Belfast

Lean Coffee Belfast
WHEN 28th June 2019
WHERE Mays Meadow, Belfast

Coffee&Code
WHEN 29th June 2019
WHERE High Street, Belfast

Tech Nation Talks - Northern Ireland
WHEN 3rd July 2019
WHERE Ormeau Baths, Belfast

Digital first patient Communications
WHEN 18th July 2019
WHERE Hilton, Templepatrick

.Inet Meetup - Summer 2019
WHEN 1st Aug 2019
WHERE Ormeau Baths, Belfast

Cyber Security Essentials
WHEN 6th Aug 2019
WHERE Belfast

Social Media Belfast 2019
WHEN 5th Sep 2019
WHERE Titanic Belfast

Invent 2019 Awards Night
WHEN 10th Oct 2019
WHERE Waterfront, Belfast

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