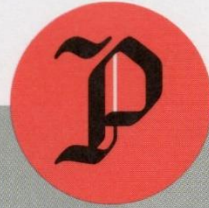


Issue: #11

PIONEERS POST QUARTERLY

*Intelligent journalism for
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Is corporate interest in social enterprise transformative or purely cosmetic?



GLOBAL FOCUS:
SCOTLAND

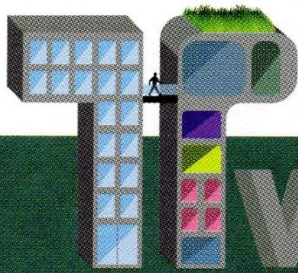
Is Scottish policy and practice putting the rest of the UK to shame?

TWO'S
COMPANY

Why opposites attract and what they can do for each other

WISE100:
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Your opportunity to spotlight leading women with a social mission



TWO'S COMPANY

MICHAEL BROWN, EMPOWER TO COOK + MARK HICKEN, JANSSEN

To kick off our new series looking at social enterprise and corporate collaboration, we meet the bosses of a food education business and a global pharmaceutical brand, who unite around the role of the family

RUSSELL HARGRAVE

Michael Brown and Mark Hicken have united around a simple idea: that food can change people's lives for the better.

Brown is the founder of Empower to Cook, a social enterprise he established in Buckinghamshire in 2014 which blends his passions for creativity, cooking and teaching. It works with children, community organisations and corporate groups to provide cookery classes and information about nutrition. Wherever possible they use food which would otherwise go to waste. Everyone is then encouraged to muck in and make their own meal.

For the last two years, after being introduced by a mutual friend, Brown has worked closely with Hicken, MD of Janssen UK & Ireland, a pharmaceutical company of Johnson & Johnson.

They are a likeable, chatty pair. They may not be equal partners – the glossy setting of Johnson & Johnson's head office soon reminds you of the power imbalance between corporates and any small business – but the two have found a way to become collaborators on a cause. A year ago their relationship resulted in Janssen seconding a member of its staff directly into Empower to Cook. The corporate has supported social enterprises and charities for years, from staff volunteer days to diversifying its supply chain, but for Janssen this was the first deal of its kind.

"Michael and I had had a few conversations," Hicken remembers, "and he came up with the idea of somebody who could offer a bit of business mentorship, or a secondment to help a little bit with the strategic thinking. We have those capabilities in

our organisation, and we found that that is more useful, often, to social enterprises than volunteering."

It's easy to see why Janssen was inspired by Brown's vision.

When Brown presented to the School for Social Entrepreneurs, for example, he wasn't slow to showcase his big idea. "I stood up on the first day and said, *I want to change food education in the UK*," he smiles. "You've got to be bold sometimes."

At its simplest, Empower to Cook is about "bringing people together around food," Brown says. But the meals served up are a way for people to build healthier relationships with both the food and each other. "I don't want people to be chefs," he explains. "I want them to enjoy the food, and also to think 'I could try something different, I could try something else, I could work closer with my children,



↑ Good company: Mark Hicken (left) and Michael Brown.

I could incorporate more vegetables.’”

Hicken nods in agreement.

“One of the things that we know, through some of the other work we have done with other under-served communities, is that the role of the family is critical in helping particularly younger members of families fulfil their potential,” he says.

“I get asked very often, ‘Which social enterprise are we working with, what difference are we making, why don’t we do more?’”

“So if you can sit around a dinner table, and have a nice family dinner because someone in the family can cook, then it makes a big difference to how families function and how people relate to each other. That just makes sense to me. It’s an obvious solution.”

Empower to Cook appears to be thriving, but Brown faced a rocky path to get here. “I lost a job through redundancy and I couldn’t find a job for three years,” he says. His normally ebullient mood becomes more serious at the memory. “I went for a job at Asda. I went for a job as a chef, and I hadn’t worked as a chef for twenty years. I just couldn’t get a job. I have challenges around ADHD. I left school without any qualifications.”

He plugged away and is clearly very happy with the results. “I love being hands-on,” he explains. “I love delivering, that’s where my main skill is.” The colleague seconded over from Janssen, Steve Ross, has other talents, and Brown is clear-sighted that a good business plan will involve bringing in “people to do the things I’m not very good at”.

The benefits of the partnership for Empower to Cook is obvious. The impact Janssen hopes to achieve by directing some of its considerable resources into the social enterprise is less clear, though, beyond the corporate’s promise to support people living close to its Buckinghamshire headquarters. Hicken talks a good game, instead, on how such partnerships can give

the corporate a professional advantage.

“The workforce keeps you honest,” he claims “So I get asked very often, ‘Which social enterprise are we working with, what are we doing, what difference are we making, why don’t we do more?’ There is always a lot of challenge from within.”

If private companies want to attract and then keep the best staff, he adds, “there has to be a sense that there is a higher purpose, and a sense of doing the right thing”.

The best argument for Janssen’s support may be that Empower to Cook is still here, and is making big plans for the future. Brown will soon start a new three-year programme, Fit and Fed, linking-up with another social enterprise and schools in two of the most deprived areas of High Wycombe. The goal is to help families cook and then sit down to eat together, with all the benefits this can bring.

Brown and Hicken have forged a partnership which works, and there is more to come. ■

To learn more about *Empower to Cook*, see: empowertocook.co.uk