

Appreciating People founder Tim Slack proves age is no barrier to success - Liverpool Echo

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Tim Slack, with some Appreciating People teaching aids

The term 'entrepreneur' is usually associated with 'young' – but that isn't always the case, as demonstrated by silver-haired Tim Slack.

He only decided he wanted to set up his own company after taking early retirement from local government at the age of 52, 1 years ago.

He had worked for Wirral council, mainly on regeneration, youth work and Europe's Objective 1 funding programme. He said: "I did a lot of community development stuff."

He founded Appreciating People from his Allerton home eight years ago and the venture now turns over £100,000, although he said, because many of his clients are in the public sector, it would be double that were it not for the dreaded 'austerity'.

Appreciating People uses Appreciative Inquiry, a philosophy developed in America which emphasises the positives of a business or organisation in order to improve services and performance.

Mr Slack explained: "Instead of looking at an organisation's problems, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) looks at its strengths, and then develops a way to go forward.

"It is not about problem-solving, it is strengths-based and generates change and increases the bottom line. It is more about not being hierarchical and being more democratic."

AI involves everyone, from the top down: "The guys on the front line know more than the people at the top most of the time. One chief executive said if he wants to know what is going on in his company he goes and sits in the staff canteen."

Although AI is widely practised, his firm's AI Essentials – a pack of 21 cards, or a shorter 12-pack version, which provide an understanding of the principles and practice of AI and are suitable for AI practitioners, HR and organisation development professionals – is the first of its kind to be developed.

Mr Slack is now producing these packs for use around the world and is in the process of getting them translated into a range

of different languages to improve their global appeal.

Closer to home the firm has worked with the likes of Alder Hey children's hospital, Liverpool Vision, and Westminster Council.

But it is establishing a range of overseas contacts, which started almost two years ago with a venture in Czech Republic capital Prague, and even Nepal.

And as the appeal of AI continues to develop, Mr Slack's four-strong team are working increasingly more with overseas clients.

He said: "We are now selling in Australia, the US, and across Europe, including Turkey and Italy.

This growth was helped by a two-pronged focus: "We got a short version of the 21 cards, which is now 12, and colleagues in Europe asked us to translate the packs."

The packs are being translated into Spanish, with an eye to the potentially lucrative Latin American market, French, German, Dutch and Turkish, which will be used by a growing band of international partners cultivated by Appreciating People.

Mr Slack revealed: "We will be training in these countries towards the end of this year, particularly Turkey and Italy."

He paid tribute to the UK Trade and Investment (UKTI) team at Liverpool Chamber of Commerce which has helped with funding towards overseas business trips, and translation costs.

And he emphasised the need for translating the training aids for local markets: "It is clear from the evidence that business English is what people have and want.

"But to take it from the business world to local communities it has to be in their own language. There's a gap in the market."

An interesting deviation from the business model is the use of AI in healthcare, he revealed.

"The packs can be used to help families cope with the onset of dementia in the early stages.

"Dementia is like cancer was 20 years ago, it is not a death sentence. We are all going to get it at some level."

He said Liverpool and Devon NHS Trusts are now clients. And the firm is in the process of developing a relationship with Salford University which could lead to a dedicated programme.

Mr Slack said trading has been tough over the past couple of years and the business has required personal investment.

But he said: "I sense a change coming on. This approach is now getting understood more because the old systems don't work."

In keeping with the drive towards digital platforms an 'e-book' version is in the pipeline, but Mr Slack said there is still an appetite for traditional methods: "People still want to feel it and touch it.

"For example, I have Country Living magazine on i-Pad, but I am going to cancel it because I like to touch it and feel it.

"You think you can access the internet all the time, but in places like Africa that's not possible.

"I was in Kathmandu and the internet would go down for a couple of days at a time. If you want an effective business. it is about conversations, relationships and trusting people to do a good job. It is about getting people away from the screen."