Startuponline

**Summary:** Startuponline has developed and proven a scheme to help offenders over the age of 30 to start their own businesses. We:
- identify potential candidates in prison, often from prison business courses
- help candidates build their business plan
- support selected candidates with a mix of modest grant funding plus coaching.

Having the means of earning a living has an immeasurably positive impact on their lives and those of their families.

**Judges comments:**

"A very good service for those who want to take the step to achieving on their own and having their own business."

"An innovative and excellent approach to challenging and helping prisoners to have, and achieve, higher aspirations. I am particularly impressed by the mentoring angle."

"A great opportunity, would be so keen to see this extended to other prisons so that more ex-offenders had the opportunity to realise true employment opportunities on release. WELL DONE"

"Gives prisoners a reason to go straight and take their futures seriously."

**Mari Simpson, Mentor Director at Startuponline**

**How did you become involved with Startuponline?**

It was started by our current CEO, Juliet Hope, as a project with the Royal London Society. I started working here 5 years ago in a different role and gradually became more involved with the running of the project.

**What was the inspiration behind the project?**

There’s a lot going on in prisons in terms of finding interim employment for ex-offenders but employers are still put-off by criminal records. Some people come to us after months of trying to find a job. People learn skills in prison but don’t always have the means to put them to use when they get out. For example some people learn construction skills but they can’t afford to buy tools when they leave prison, we can help them with this. The idea to have a programme that bridges that gap was so simple and easy to replicate, and cost relatively little to set up.

**How did you get the ball rolling?**

We started out as an experimental project with RLS then we got our own funding from various charitable trusts. We began in the south east as we had a strong link with the governor of Brixton but we’ve grown since then. We invite candidates to present their ideas before a panel of judges at what we call Entrepreneur Days held within prisons – it works a bit like Dragons’ Den. The panel is made up of one of our trustees, business experts, or people in industry, for example we recently had someone from Forbes magazine judging, and we commit to funding there and then. We also regularly include some of our past successful candidates on the panel. Ideally we like to get things in place for people 4-5 months before their release. People move around a lot in prisons so news of our programme spread by word of mouth, but we also dropped round leaflets and put
up posters in prison educational and resettlement departments. We've also had write-ups in some magazines, including *Inside Time*, a national prison newspaper.

**Were there any obstacles?**
Funding – there's so much demand within prisons for this kind of work and not enough money to support it. All the agencies we've worked with have been really supportive, lack of employment is a key factor in why people re-offend so most people can see the benefit of running a programme like Startup.

**What have you gained from this experience?**
Giving somebody the chance to start afresh and provide for themselves and their family is so uplifting. Some of the people we work with have had so many setbacks in their lives and have never been given this kind of encouragement before. It’s very satisfying to see people come through this with a real sense of hope for the future.

**What piece of advice would you give to others who’d like to get involved in this kind of work?**
The main thing is building long-term relationships within the prison service, especially with education and resettlement departments, and finding out what they want. You also have to prepare yourself for disappointment as not every business is going to be a success and people don’t always stick to their original ideas.

**More info:**
[www.startupnow.org.uk](http://www.startupnow.org.uk)
[www.insidetime.org](http://www.insidetime.org)