

Speaking to the Head of Business Gateway Edinburgh

Susan Harkins is head of [Business Gateway Edinburgh](#). She has been with the organisation for 15 years first of all as a business adviser and now she runs the organisation in Edinburgh as well as chairing the Business Gateway operational network encompassing the 15 lead partners all across Scotland. She travels the length and breadth of the country, and it is pretty clear that she loves her job.



Susan explained where her own career path began. She said : “I started in the Craigmillar Business Incubator in 2004 where I worked for a few years. I had just finished a part-time MBA then. I didn’t go to university as I went straight to work from school, but went on to study an HNC in Business at Jewel and Esk Valley College as an evening course.

“I was then given the chance to study for an MBA at University and I took up the challenge. It was really good for me.

“It gave me an insight into many concepts, particularly marketing, that I still use today. It was really interesting

and I met lots of great people. I was selling office space at the time, quite small units and I got a feel for business through that job too.

“After I had finished my MBA I got the job as business adviser. We did a lot of networking there and we got a lot of people to come to Craigmillar who might otherwise have gone to the city centre for advice. I had never worked in a community like that, although it is near to where I grew up in Joppa, and where I live now in Musselburgh.”

Business Gateway is the advice you need when starting up or indeed running an existing company with workshops and one to one mentoring. They run 300 free workshops a year in Edinburgh and Lothians on all manner of subjects such as PR and employing people for the first time.

There is a team of growth advisers specifically for businesses who are already successful but needing to grow, and again there is a series of workshops for those people too.

It is set up in Waverley Court in Edinburgh and is linked to The City of Edinburgh Council. It has been around since the 1990s when it was initially set up by Scottish Enterprise. During the first few years of the SNP government it was moved to the remit of local authorities and through time some councils, including Edinburgh, took the operation in house. In Edinburgh, Business Gateway looks after the geographical area of Edinburgh and Lothian.

The idea was to sit the organisation alongside some other council services so here the reception staff actually do sit next to the planning department where they can often offer some initial help.

Business Gateway is not a funding organisation but they signpost clients to sources of funding, particularly where those businesses are niche organisations or social enterprises. There is a dedicated social enterprise adviser,

one of the things that they recognised a need for when they first came under the council's wing.

Susan explained : "There is a lot of finance out there, and all we do is work out what is best for the business. All our Business Gateway services are free, no matter what advice you need. I think our help is most useful for micro-businesses but we will advise anyone of any size. As the business starts to grow there is more support to help with growth.

"We can help in lots of different ways with support or advice from our team of business advisers. They will help people with any questions such as business plans, understanding where their customers will come from and who their competitors are. Also finances and cashflow are important too.

"People find in most cases that they get to a certain point where they need to speak to someone rather than reading any more information. As a lot of people are coming to us as new businesses it is even more important."

Susan has a young daughter who has just started at High School and of course she was Chair of the Parent Council (give something to a busy person to do!) where she loved the fundraising aspect. She also enjoys gardening, which is just as well since she has a large garden at home where she manages to grow at least some plants successfully. As part of a close knit family with two sisters and her mum living nearby she has plenty to keep her busy out of office time.



Business Gateway are the lead sponsor of the [Start Up Summit](#) on 31 October 2018. On 2 November they will host a Business Breakfast and there is a week long series of events taking place then.

The Business Gateway website explains what the summit is all about : “The theme for this year’s [Startup Summit](#) is ‘the power of company culture.’ Experts will be looking at the growing values-led mentality of both consumers and employees, as well as addressing recent controversies and issues such as the gender pay gap results and the gig economy. Startup Summit will be exploring what defines a positive culture, how businesses can best create one and, crucially, how they can retain it as they grow. This year, confirmed speakers include Alan Mahon, Founder of Brewgooder, Mike Atterley, Founder of BlackCircles.com and CEO of Atterly, and Leela Srinivasan, Chief Marketing Officer at Survey Monkey.”



Susan set up a Women in Business network to promote women in the business community, saying that she meets many more businesswomen now than she used to.

She said : “There are a lot of people starting up businesses

in the Health and Wellbeing for example women starting up with innovative ideas about tackling period poverty. This is probably a result of discussion about the topic in the press which has led to people thinking of ways they can help.

“What I see among new businesses in Edinburgh is a lot of innovation, but there is a huge rise in the food and drink sector and particularly the artisan producer. This is not just gin but other products too like craft beer, oils, biscuits and chocolate.”

She concluded : “Not one day is ever the same. I meet lots of really interesting people!

[All the Business Gateway events are listed here](#)

Tel 0131 516 6916 for free advice with your business.