BRINGING IRISH SKILLS TO HAITI

BENEFITING BOTH SIDES

I T WAS BACK TO THE DAY JOB for about 50 Irish entrepreneurs, bankers and accountants last week after a flying visit to the Caribbean aimed at finding ways to help the people of Haiti haul themselves out of poverty.

On Tuesday morning, Michael Dawson, chief executive of giftvouchershop.ie, was still buzzing. “The trip was one of the most amazing weeks of my life,” Dawson says. “I think it was very productive. By this time next year the entire group will have left a serious mark on the communities we visited.”

Dawson’s visit to the Caribbean was part of a chief executive retreat organised by the Ernst & Young’s Entrepreneur of the Year award scheme.

The theme was corporate social responsibility (CSR) and Dawson, a finalist this year in the international entrepreneur category, doesn’t mind admitting that his understanding of the subject matter was changed radically by his visit to the western world’s poorest country.

“From a personal point of view, I’m a lot clearer about what CSR is about,” Dawson says.

“I thought it was about big projects, big sponsorships and giving things away. I thought it was something that would cost you big money, but you can actually make money out of CSR. The key is to relate it in to your business in a way that benefits both sides,” he adds.

Kellie McElhaney, a California-based CSR expert, summed it up succinctly. “If it produces a positive social, environmental and financial return then its CSR,” she told the entrepreneurs on their visit to the Caribbean. “If it’s only social, then it’s philanthropy. If it’s only financial then it’s not CSR.”

Another entrepreneur on the trip, who has asked not to be named, has decided to finish in his job and focus 100 per cent on CSR projects.

The person involved sold their business a few years back but kept working for the company under its new ownership.

The entrepreneur, who wants to resign from their position before going public, will be based in Dublin but will have a special focus on Haiti.

“It touched me in such a way that...
while I was here I decided that this is what I wanted to do," the entrepreneur said.

Some of the entrepreneurs had admitted to being sceptical about what could be achieved by the whistle-stop tour.

By the end, however, they all agreed that significant progress had been made with their projects and they have committed themselves to remaining involved in the projects long term.

Six teams of entrepreneurs were dispersed to various locations in the central and southern part of Haiti to lend their expertise to locals. The teams were warmly received by local people who lack access to basics like medicine, clean water and electricity.

By the end of the tour, the Ernst & Young finalists, past and present, had agreed to help fund scholarships for schoolchildren, to provide better roasting ovens for cashew nut producers; and to buy life jackets and new fishing boats.

A run-down reservoir is to be given new life to provide water to irrigate vital crops and a large mango farm is to be given help with its infrastructure, branding and packaging.

The entrepreneurs are also looking at establishing a Haiti Foundation that might co-ordinate the various projects on a long-term basis and look at other ways in which practical help can be provided to the islanders.

All of the entrepreneurs have agreed to chip in financially, as have Ernst & Young and Ulster Bank, the trip's principal sponsors.

It is not clear what the final bill will be, but when the time and money spent is added up, it's sure to be a significant seven-figure sum. 

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Above: a group of smiling children from Haiti. Above right: Denis O’Brien with local people involved in the project.