

# Moving smoothly up in the family firm

AS businesses battled against soaring fuel and energy costs last week entrepreneurs could have been forgiven if they missed the speech by Business Secretary John Hutton in which he called time (again) on the era of complex employment regulations. Proclaiming that continually loading new burdens on business would compromise the ability of families to look after themselves Hutton added new rhetorical spice to well-worn pledges for ministers to be thoughtful when proposing new regulations. Hutton highlighted red tape affecting employers but SMEs complain about red tape affecting many areas of operation. This week an entrepreneur operating in the specialised world of supplying stairlifts notes that the success of rules governing housing which should boost his business may be diluted by unhelpful approaches to building regulation. At a time when SMEs need to ensure they don't run out of cash, Lisa Barry's stacks of state payers will also resonate among business owners.

**Name**  
Lisa Melinda Barry

**Age**  
Closely guarded secret, but I'll admit to over 21

**What are your businesses called?**  
Stairlifts (Scotland) Ltd now trading as SSL Scotland and our sister company, SSL Access

**Where is it based?**  
In Glasgow's east end, beside all of the activity for the 2014 Commonwealth Games; the redevelopment of the area will act as a much-needed shot in the arm for this community and I hope that as we grow we can offer more jobs to those in the surrounding neighbourhoods.

**What service does it offer?**  
SSL Scotland supplies and fits domestic stair lifts, shower cubicles, shower chairs and automatic toilets for Local Authorities' services users in Scotland with 24-hour break-down cover. SSL Access supplies and fits vertical and platform lifts to help clients become compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act.

**Who does it sell to?**  
SSL Scotland works with community occupational therapists and other individuals. SSL Access tends to do business with architects, building contractors, construction companies, universities, colleges, schools, local authorities and specifiers. Many large publicly-funded developments for schools and residential homes require both SSL Scotland and SSL Access's services.

**What is its turnover?**  
Circa £3m

**SME FOCUS**



By Mark Williamson

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**How many employees?**  
26

**When was it formed?**  
Following two years of planning, we were incorporated in April 1996, although it doesn't feel like 14 years

**Why did you take the plunge?**  
I suppose I always imagined myself best-suited to dealing with people, preferably in a customer-facing role, and while at school my pursuit of a Royal College of Music and Drama qualification in Oral Communications gave me a sound grounding in presenting to an audience. After school, I took an HNC in Business Studies from Reid Kerr College in Paisley then spent two years at the Glasgow College of Building and Printing. I then did a number of different jobs in the motor trade, culminating in my becoming the first woman in the UK to be responsible for selling contract hire for heavy vehicles. I then moved on to a business development role in vehicle leasing, first at a division of NextNet then at a division of Barclays. It was a background which, though I didn't realise it at the time, gave me an excellent foundation for when I finally got a call from our family business saying more hands were needed on deck. I decided it was time to roll up my sleeves and get involved. While I enjoyed my time in the big companies, it was not nearly as exciting as being part of a small and rapidly expanding company where the only safety net is provided by the effort and determination you are prepared to put in.

**How did you raise the start-up funding?**  
I spent two years or so helping my mother and brother plan the launch of the business. The first firm of accountants we used advised us that we would need around £75,000 in founding capital; we disagreed and terminated their appointment. We then employed Wylie & Bisset, the CA firm we still work with, to help us put together a more feasible business plan. A friendly bank manager, a government-backed

**What do you see as your biggest challenge?**  
I can't stand unpaid debt... "your cheque's in the post" is such a tired excuse

small business loan and a lien on my flat saw us raise the £25,000 capital needed. Fortunately my property is no longer acting as security.

**What was your biggest break?**  
Usually it was a meeting with the taxman - we won a £100,000 contract with the Inland Revenue which had to make six of its store rooms compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act. With corporate clients word of mouth remains our best marketing tool and throws up some great results.

**What was your worst moment?**  
Nothing really bad, thank goodness, but seeing my mum retire from the business in April 2006 was daunting. She was the driving force behind the company in setting it up and was entirely responsible for its early success. It was really difficult to see her cope with relinquishing her day-to-day involvement in the business.

**What do you most enjoy about running the business?**  
Meeting varied and surprising challenges head-on and overcoming them. As a director I have to be a jill of all Trades and be ready to get involved wherever needed. A couple of years back, when a flu bug was ravaging commercial workforces across the country, many of our staff were laid low. Turning up in my business suit to one particular service and maintenance call I was not quite what our clients were expecting, but they soon forgot their surprise when I carried out the repair and put their stairlift back in working order. Running your own business is all about finding solutions to problems and having a "can do" attitude. If you believe there is a solution then you will find one. In my view it is also about networking and always looking for sales opportunities, but never being "pushy".

**What do you least enjoy?**  
Repetition; definitely repetition.

**What is your biggest bugbear?**  
I can't stand unpaid debt. It's so unnecessary and a complete drain on time and resources. Everyone has to pay in the end so let's just get on with it. "The cheque in the post" is such a tired excuse.

**What are your top priorities?**  
I want the company to grow through delivering new products



**SETTING PRETTY:** Lisa Barry believes that by focusing on delivering high standards she hopes to keep her order book full. Picture: James Galloway

and services to existing and new customers. In order to do this, we are purchasing and implementing across the group a bespoke database which will build-in capacity for organic growth at a sustainable rate.

The company's people are its most valuable asset and we are actively seeking to substantially increase our headcount of skilled employees. We are also buying new vehicles to make the van fleet ready for anticipated expansion and we will link the fleet to the database to ensure rapid response, speedy delivery and enhanced levels of service.

The priority is to provide the capacity for growth so that anticipated expansion is carried

out in a controlled and strategic manner.

**What are your ambitions for the firm?**

I'm really proud of the service we offer and the job we do for clients. By focusing on delivering high standards I hope to keep the order book full, create more employment opportunities in the local area and make life easier for the people that use our equipment. As a society I think we have to better realise how important it is to look after each other. On top of the economic benefits from helping people with disabilities, lead a normal life and contribute to society, the emotional benefits are huge.

**What single thing could the Westminster and/or Scottish Governments do that would most help?**

Both the Scottish Government and local authorities have huge budgets and a very complex and highly regulated procurement process which obliges them to seek best value, but I would like to see them much more disposed in favour of Scottish companies when they are sourcing their requirements. The cost of not supporting Scottish companies is paid in jobs, and that should be taken into account in a wider financial calculation. I would also like to see consistency of best practice in building control and regulations across the country's

42 local authorities. I recognise the argument for local autonomy, but if we had the same set of rules across the country everybody would be able to deliver services quicker and more efficiently.

**What was the most valuable lesson you learned?**

A little respect goes a long, long way. If you leave the door open on the way out, you can always get back in later. This is something I try to do in both my professional and personal life.

**How do you relax?**  
Is there something better than chilled sauvignon blanc?