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Launch of the Useful Simple Trust

12 November 2009

The new model army

On Thursday evening in Shoreditch, a diverse group of politicians, teachers, designers and artists celebrated the launch of the Useful Simple Trust. The formation of the Trust brings together some of the UK's leading designers through its founding companies Expedition Engineering, thomas.matthews and Think Up. All these companies are now owned by the Trust, with more to come. There are ultimately no human owners, only human beneficiaries.

thomas.matthews is a communication agency well known in its field for its pioneering approach to sustainable design. Director Sophie Thomas has been named one of Design Week's Hot Fifty for her work with Three Trees Don't Make a Forest. Expedition Engineering, who also celebrated their 10th birthday this year, are the engineers for the 2012 Olympic Velodrome among many other things and have built a reputation on their design-led approach to civil and structural engineering. Director Chris Wise is a Fellow of the Royal Academy of Engineering, Master of the RSA's Royal Designers and Trustee of the Design Council and is widely recognised for his design ability.

Think Up is the newly formed educational arm of the Trust. Director Ed McCann is a Fellow of the Institution of Civil Engineers and has a long commitment to education through his work in design teaching, university programme accreditation and television.

The board of Trustees includes industry-renowned designers: architect Mike Davies of Rogers Stirk Harbour, theatre designer Timothy O'Brien RDI, and civil engineer Sir Duncan Michael, former chairman of Arup and Trustee of the Arup Foundation.

The great giveaway

The founders of each of the companies have given away their ownership because they believe that traditional ownership models don't enable them to

effectively pursue their trail blazing and ethical passions. Considerations of human wellbeing, business succession, entrepreneurship and fair reward have led them to set up this novel organisation. Given that the founders' shares were worth several million pounds, at least on paper, this is not a trivial act.

“Joining a large family of like-minded people and companies is the logical next step for us to continue trail blazing and realise our ambitious visions. It is a truly exciting place to be!” Sophie Thomas

An ethical proposition

In simple terms all they have done is set up an employee benefit trust, an example of the “great redistribution of ownership” advocated by organisations such as the New Economics Foundation.

But the Useful Simple model goes further than just employee ownership. The aim of the Trust is “to blaze a trail in the provision of the human environment”. This trail-blazing obligation is not just hot air, but is inked into the Trust's constitution. The benefit to employees is defined in terms of “wellbeing”, and not as is often the case, money. Of course, wellbeing depends on many things and what works for some, will not work for others. For us wellbeing depends on fair reward and a great working environment but also on having the opportunity to develop, doing things that are valid and interesting. Money is great, but for the Trust it is just fuel and not an end in itself.

In a post-recession era, government and influential think tanks like DEMOS and the RSA are seeking new ways of working which measure success in business and the wider economy using broader criteria than simply money. We think that Useful Simple does just that, in spades.

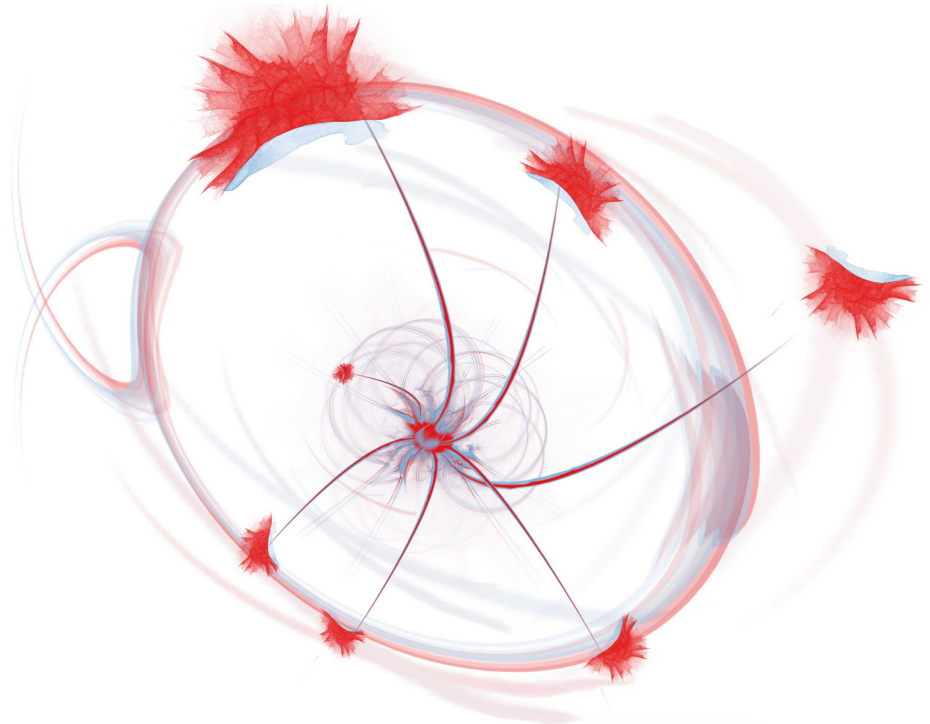
“What is involved is a shared acquisition of guiding principles, necessary to support the aims of the Useful Simple Trust, a very tall order in the face of a prevailing confusion of values. What an opportunity this is, however, for lifelong further education.” Timothy O'Brien, Theatre Designer, Trustee of Useful Simple

A sustainable model

There are additional benefits to this working model. It ensures the sustainability of the practices beyond the life of the current leadership. Traditional models for limited companies and partnerships can only be led by those prepared to take big risks in the early stages or those who are rich enough to buy into established practices. The Trust opens up leadership possibilities without those constraints. It doesn't saddle the next generation with the burden of life support for their retired founders.

The arrangement of the Trust companies as a group of small organisations enables rapid response to market opportunities. Useful Simple does not have the organisational inertia that exists in large organisations. The diversity of these small enterprises also means that Useful Simple is not reliant on a single activity. In essence, the Trust model is a dynamic organism of entities that

move, grow and contract depending on the external environment. Given that many creative design companies exist for less than 5 years (according to the Design Council research), this flexible family offers great potential for evolutionary development beyond that. We expect the Trust to change its shape almost every day.



(Picture: snapshot of the Useful Simple organisational diagram: 12th November 4.47pm.)

A collaborative endeavour

Importantly, companies within the Useful Simple Trust all retain their individual identity and conduct their affairs in tune with their own markets. But the Trust goes beyond traditional joint ventures or associations to offer an organisational ethos with commercial diversity, built on mutual support and opportunities for collaborative working. Oliver Broadbent, an associate of Think Up sums up this point thus: “The potential for collaboration is exemplified by the birth of Think Up, a company that combines the talents of leading designers with experts from a whole sweep of different industries to create a portfolio of outstanding educational and training programmes.”

Put it another way... who knows what a graphic designer will come up with having had breakfast with an engineer and lunch with a textile designer?!

Having witnessed this tremendous beginning, the Beneficiaries and Trustees are anticipating exciting times ahead and look forward to welcoming new members into the Useful Simple Trust.

Useful Simple is an employee benefit trust

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