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Employee Ownership Association Conference 2017

On a chilly November morning, The Hilton Metropole in Birmingham hosted the 12th EOA Annual Conference; a full on two day where 680 employee owners from across the UK meet to discuss best practice, share ideas and build connections within the ever growing sector. Ten delegates from across our businesses, Wise Investment, Evenlode and Wise Funds, were in attendance this year, representing all areas of our businesses, manning our stand in the Exhibition Hall and networking with other attendees.

Day one began with a welcome from the event sponsors, Capital For Colleagues, followed by an inspirational Key Note Speech and vibrant video from Mark Constantine OBE, who founded Lush Cosmetics in 1995. The driving force behind the business and product development at Lush, Mark shared with us the story behind his success and how the transparent business model they run and their dedication to employee voice, support and investment makes them a perfect fit for the Employee Ownership journey, upon which they are just beginning to embark.

In the afternoon delegates were invited to attend presentations from the winners of 2016's Employee Ownership Awards, in sessions described as "Best in Class". With team members attending all four session, we were able to hear all about how last year's winners were able to achieve their awards and how they have progressed since, as well as asking questions to the representatives about their experiences. The talk from Union Industries, who won Employee Owned Innovation of the Year in 2016, were as engaging as ever, giving the thought provoking lesson; "sometimes it's better to do familiar things in an unfamiliar way".

Engagement workshops followed, with hands on activities for delegates to enjoys and spend time networking with each other in a more informal environment.

It was then time for the first of three break-out sessions. We attended a range of sessions between us during this hour including "how can better communication help you build a distinctive Employee Ownership culture" and "strategic development - by all; for all". The session "five ways to make positive impact," lead by Remploy (an organisation who aim to help disabled people in the workforce) and Divine Chocolate (who were at the forefront of the fair trade movement), provoked a fascinating discussion and was particularly interesting, giving our charitable initiative to raise £1million over the next ten years between our three subsidiary companies. In fact, positive impact seemed to be a running theme throughout the conference this year, perhaps shedding an insight into our social conscience as a community of employee owners.

The highlight of the conference was, as always, the Gala Dinner and Employee Ownership Awards, with entertaining commentary from BBC News presenter Martine Coxall. A brilliant excuse to get dressed up and celebrate the successes of the front runners in the sector.

But it's not all fun and games! Delegates were up bright and early, with a 7am start on the Tuesday for the Annual General Meeting, followed by a round-up of the year by the EOA's chief Executive, Deb Oxley and the second Key Note Speech by Dr Hisham Mahmoud. Dr Mahmoud, flew in specially for the conference from his home in Canada, where he is the Global President and CEO of Golder Associates - a leading global engineering firm and one of the world's biggest employee owned companies. His speech demonstrated once again that it is possible to put people before profit even on a very large scale, whilst still running an incredibly successful business.



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The interest in our stand was booming in the first of the days break-out sessions, which kept us very busy, before we moved on to the second and third break-out sessions. Having been named runner up in the Employee Owner of the Year category of the awards in 2016, Kerri hosted a session on behalf of Wise Investment, entitled “Roles and Responsibilities of Elected Representatives”, which had an excellent turn out, discussing the corporate and legal responsibilities of trustees and how you can bring employee ownership to life as an elected representative. Delegates also attended sessions on driving productivity, using employee ownership to gain a competitive advantage and employee behaviours. As well as discussions and workshops around ensuring your employee ownership structure is sustainable, the neuro science of co-owned leadership and the diagnostic tools you can use to analysis how effective your employee ownership structure is.

The final Key Note Speech was from another international guest, Loren Rodger’s of the Centre for Employee Ownership in the US. Loren writes extensively on employee ownership in professional and academic publications, and is a regular conference speaker at events around the world. He gave a unique insight into the similarities and differences in the sector between the UK and the USA and shared films and stories of companies who are successfully operating as employee owners in the USA today.

Closing the conference, we were reminded of the theme for Employee Ownership for this year. Be Involved; Be Informed; Be Inspired and the annual conference certainly delivered all three. As we head into 2018, Wise hope to put into action some of the great piece of advice that we have brought away this year for the befit of our staff, our clients and the wider community.