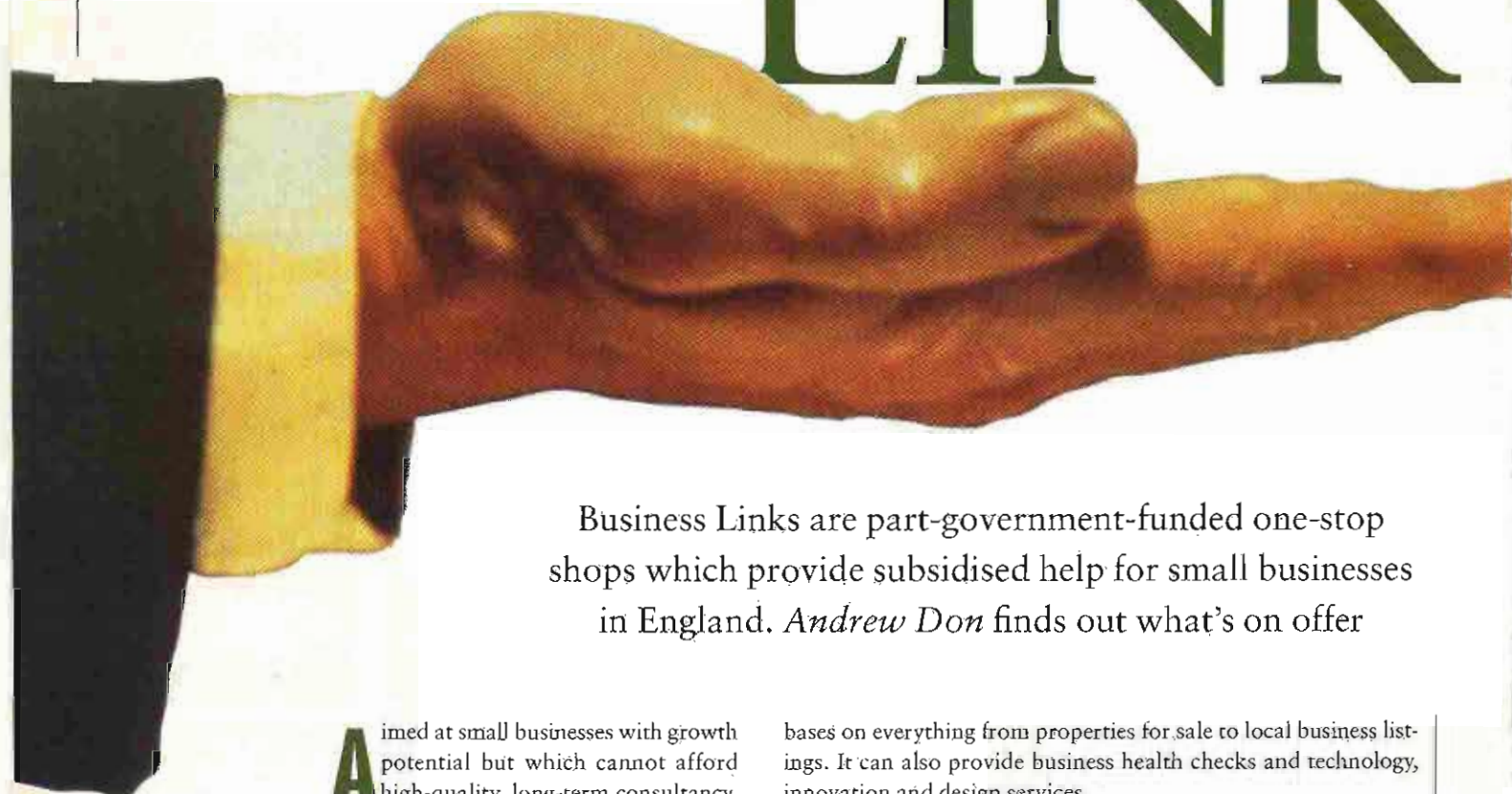


THE MISSING LINK



Business Links are part-government-funded one-stop shops which provide subsidised help for small businesses in England. *Andrew Don* finds out what's on offer

Aimed at small businesses with growth potential but which cannot afford high-quality, long-term consultancy, Business Link is a national network of one-stop shops where established business employing fewer than 200 people can seek help.

The first Business Link shop was set up in Leicester in 1993 and there are now 72, running from 194 outlets in 139 English towns, with about 5000 businesses using them each week between October and December 1995.

Each Business Link shop typically comprises its own personnel as well as those from Training & Enterprise Councils, Chambers of Commerce, and sometimes local authorities and banks.

On offer

Services include financial advice, and specialised training and research, which are all accessible on one telephone number. If the query is highly specialised, Business Link says it will bring in experts and put them in touch with the companies seeking help. The range of advice available includes:

- Strategy
- Law
- Grants
- Training
- Start-ups

The Business Link organisation claims to have access to data-

bases on everything from properties for sale to local business listings. It can also provide business health checks and technology, innovation and design services.

Cost

Each Business Link shop has different pricing policies, with some offering more free help than others. Companies who have used them say the amount and quality of help usually depends on who is at the other end of the telephone. One gym boss reports that the first person he spoke to was unhelpful, but when he got another member of the team, the service was exceptional.

Don't worry, all the Business Link outlets will tell you just when the money meter starts ticking, but there is always an element of free initial advice to be had.

Business Link Hereford & Worcester offers one free day of help from a financial, innovation, design or technology advisor and will also lend a free business advisor to companies for up to two days to help identify potential improvements. And a further subsidised 10½-day consultancy package costs £750 plus VAT.

To put this into context, you could expect to pay up to £400 a day for independent consultants.

But area business manager for Worcester Nick Dobson says: "The best advice to businesses is to get in there now." This is because each Business Link will be required to generate more funding itself within three years of opening, although this will not happen to most outlets until 1998.

Dobson admits: "There is a danger that services will have to reflect market prices more accurately."

The Department of Trade & Industry will continue to provide its own small business services and funding through the Business Link network. But the Links will lose what is known as pump priming – government money which pays for overheads and Link start-up costs.

Body FX Gym

Leanne and Kieron Pickervance opened the Body FX Gym on Parr Industrial Estate, St Helens, Merseyside, last September. But they would not have got the necessary funding to get their fitness centre off the ground without the advice of their local Business Link shop.

Leanne Pickervance, an experienced professional dancer and choreographer, has been a British Aerobic Champion and a Northern Gold Medallist. Kieron Pickervance has played rugby league for St Helens, is a first Dan in shotokan karate, and has more than 20 years' body-building experience. Both had provided sports tuition and wanted to open a gym. Says Kieron Pickervance: "We went to NatWest with a home-made business plan. One of the ladies politely pointed out it was not professional enough and gave us forms advising us to contact Business Link."

They spoke to Alan Holbrook, a business counsellor, who helped them draw up a business plan. "When we calculated our projected earnings it came up with healthy profit," says Pickervance.

This helped them secure a grant for £10,000 under the British Coal Enterprise scheme repayable over two years with 10% interest. Leanne Pickervance qualified for a £50-a-week New Business Start-up allowance for the first six months. They say they would not have known these were available to them if Business

Link had not put them in the picture.

Kieron Pickervance says: "We haven't had to pay for anything except the loan. The advice and help were free. Without the loan from the Coal Board we could not have started up. A bank loan would have been too expensive and I don't think they would have been prepared to take the risk the Coal Board took."

Body FX Gym, which comprises a gym and aerobics studio, now has 200 members. It is not as profitable as forecast – bad winter weather hit business, explains Pickervance – but the company is breaking even and paying the bills.

And Holbrook says he will be on hand for the next two years to give further free help if the Pickervances want it.

One On One Fitness Centre

But for some businesses the help offered by the Business Link network is too broad. Mark Scriven, boss of the One On One Fitness Centre in Worcester, says the two-day free consultancy was not focused enough for his purposes. His business, which he launched 10 years ago, is one of only a handful of fitness centres to achieve the ISO 9002 Quality Assurance Standard. He recently designed his own fitness equipment, New Dawn, and also licenses other fitness centres to use the One On One name.

Scriven approached his local Business Link because he wanted to make his reception more efficient.

"One of my strengths is that I like to listen to a lot of people," he says. "I use what they say and I learn from everyone."

He points out that you have to be selective because not all the advice will be correct.

Business Link told him to bring in computers. "We knew we needed to do that," says Scriven. He is introducing computerised booking systems and swipe systems which accept membership cards and collect data.

Scriven acknowledges that he was sent quality people, but he wanted more help with booking systems and how the gym and booking staff interacted.

Hereford & Worcester's customer services advisor Nicky Griffiths says: "The brief of the business advisor is to give an overview of the whole situation, but if something specific is mentioned we should be able to help." ■

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP
England:
Business Link Signpost Line
0345 567765
Comparable schemes:
Scottish Business Shop Network
0800 787878
Business Connect Wales
0345 969798
Northern Ireland Industrial Development Board
01232 233233

