

Published 7th June 2008

Last year Hedley Aylott's company turned over £17 million - not bad for a business carried out behind bars. Jonny Beard-sall meets the polo-playing reformer who is giving prisoners free rein.

Hedley Aylott has the keys to HMP Wolds. Searching through his bunch for one, he lets himself through a gate in an inner security fence before unlocking the door to a different world. Inside a drab single-storey building is the office of Summit Media, an online marketing company that is a lifeline for offenders determined to go that extra mile. Aylott, 36, is its managing director. There are no prison officers or overt security measures here, nothing to remind you that this is happening inside a prison. The exception is that instead of going home at 5pm, most of the full-time staff in this office are locked in their cells.

Inside the office, some 25 people sit at computer screens in grey short-sleeved shirts with the company logo. Like any modern workplace, telephones ring all day long as the employees engage with clients all over the world. Abstract pictures hang on pale-blue walls and three identical clocks show the time in Britain, on America's east coast, where the company has several suppliers, and in Prague, where a former Summit employee opened a European HQ last year.

HMP Wolds is a category C prison five miles from Market Weighton in East Yorkshire. Opened in 1992, it was Britain's first privately run jail. Wolds inmates on Summit's staff are paid prison wages of £10-£35 a week but, mirroring procedure in a business on the outside, receive bonuses for performance, quality of work and attitude.

One employee has recently transferred to an open prison near Doncaster because his security category has been downgraded, and he now commutes to the company headquarters. This is at Townend Farm, Aylott's home about five miles from Wolds. There, non-custodial employees carry on the business. Of Summit Media's 46-strong workforce, 20 are prisoners and four are ex-offenders.



Hedley Aylott on one of his polo ponies. The success of his online marketing company has enabled him to expand his interest in the sport, and he founded the White Rose Polo Club last year. Photographs by Liz Lock and Mishka Henner

Summit Media was founded in 2000 by Aylott and his mother, Marion, who gave up her work as a senior prison educationalist to help set up the business. Last year it turned over £17 million and won the respected Tenon Entrepreneurial Spirit Award at the 2007 National Business Awards.

Among its employees - many of whom have never even troubled a magistrate - are six men serving life terms. 'So far, we've had 250 prisoners working for Summit since we began and only two of them have reoffended and been sent back to prison,' Aylott says. 'I'd say that some of the best people I've ever worked with did time here. Many swear that this is the best opportunity they've ever had.'

Aylott first stepped inside a prison as a visitor in 1989 when he was a student. A gifted musician, he was equally absorbed by mechanics and had begun an engineering degree at Nottingham. At the time, his mother was the head of education for Norwich prison; her deputy, Bridget Everitt, had become aware of Hedley's musical talents. In the Easter holidays in his first term at university Everitt asked if he would run a workshop at the prison.

He jumped at the chance to earn some holiday money. 'I was given 10 guys of my age and didn't know what to expect,' Aylott says. 'I gave them two weeks to write and record a three-track EP and put on a gig in front of the whole jail. Some were into hip-hop, some were into trance, some into rock ballads, so it was real melting-pot.'



Wolds inmates and Summit employees Jay Khan, Paul Sherrington and Lynden Bairstow

convinced the governors of the potential benefits of setting up a recording workshop there. As a result, 10 prisoners from many different cultures came together in what became known as Project X, in which they wrote and recorded a dance track about the coming together of street gangs. The track was called The Summit, and they set up their own label, Summit Records, releasing it themselves as a single in 1995.

'The performers were confident, streetwise guys, including Prince Hammer and Prince Mali, two Jamaican-born rappers. I was the enabler,' Aylott says. The record sold 18,000, the royalties going to the charity Victim Support. This led to a collaboration with the BBC Philharmonic - a 90-piece orchestra performed Fanfare for Strangeways inside the prison. 'It crystallised my view that inexperienced guys could produce a high-quality professional product,' Aylott says. While still teaching one day a week at Strangeways, he was invited to HMP Wolds in 1996 to run further music projects.

From these altruistic beginnings, a fresh idea evolved: a digital media company. Aylott was already halfway there. 'At Wolds, inmates had been building websites for theatre productions, were shooting and editing film and sound recording, so they had already shown that they were able. I felt that we could turn this into a proper business. I asked the then prison director at Wolds, Alison Rose-Quirie, and she said that we could work inside the jail.'

Summit Media began life in a tiny portable building with two desks. Aylott was joined by his mother (head of finance and human resources) and sister-in-law Victoria (head of training and development). Both women continue in these posts.

Charlotte Ridley is Summit's operations manager at HMP Wolds. 'Hedley is very inspirational, and very last-minute, and always at 100mph,' she says, laughing as he breezes away across the room to talk to someone else. Ridley was a prison officer for seven years before joining Summit three years ago. 'I run the office and liaise between it and prison. I do love this job,' she says. She earns the same as her husband, Chris, who is a prison officer at Wolds, but works better hours.

Aylott himself is warm and effusive. At 5ft 8in tall, he has an infectious enthusiasm and throws himself into everything he does. 'I'm an upbeat person,' he says. 'You need to be - being upbeat here stands out a mile. People want to look you in the eye and believe you.'

Summit advertises for recruits in Inside Times, the free newspaper that circulates in every British prison. While murderers, drug smugglers and armed robbers have successfully applied, sex offenders and fraudsters are barred, as are those with a history of witness intimidation, those who have made threats to kill using telephones or email, and those with less than 18 months to serve. Each is sent a package of in-house material and applicants must give a 40-minute presentation on the basis of which they are assessed by Aylott and three members of Summit's team. The prison director does not sit in on these sessions.

'I've had many a sleepless night,' Aylott says. 'It was a huge step allowing prisoners controlled internet access, and IT security from the prison service descended and was all over us. We have strict rules. Any prisoner that transgresses - whether it's non-work-related emails, making personal phone calls to their granny or trying to gain access to banned sites - is sacked.' They have fired 15-20 men in eight years.



Hedley Aylott and Lynden Bairstow talk e-commerce in the prison

About 10 men a month apply for a place at Summit from prisons across the country. If they are successful, it means a move to Wolds. Five will be considered and three or four given an interview. Just two are likely to be offered places. Prisoners who make it get six months training in e-commerce, particularly in search marketing, and sit the IPA (Institute of Practitioners in Advertising) exams - the industry's governing body - which qualifies them to manage marketing campaigns for clients including Google, Microsoft, Panasonic, Yahoo and

Aylott sent out press releases plugging the performance, and Radio 1's Mark Goodier surprised him by recording the gig and broadcasting it on his show. 'These guys never realised they could write music,' Aylott says. Music had played a part in his education from childhood. At the age of 13, Aylott and his twin, Caspar, became cathedral choristers at Norwich School. He played the piano and the trumpet, and by his late teens he had begun writing music in every genre from classical to rock. 'I'd borrow recording equipment and found writing, recording and production more interesting than playing keyboards on a stage.'

Having graduated from Nottingham with a 2:1 in engineering, he began a two-year masters degree in music at the University of Manchester, specialising in studio production. It was 1994 and he was living in a rented house in Salford. 'I didn't want to be a rock star - the clever bit for me was putting it all together,' he says.

Emboldened by his success at Norwich, Aylott approached Manchester's Strangeways prison and

3Mobile.

I ask John Dixon, the manager of brand communications for Panasonic UK, if much of his company's support hinged on values other than commercial factors. 'We've chosen Summit purely for business reasons,' he says. 'They deliver internet marketing and website development, which is about building our business, and are a skilful and effective company. The fact we are working with prison inmates did not influence our decision, but is something we are aware of.'

With prisoners earning a maximum £35 a week, isn't it slave labour? 'No,' Aylott insists. 'I'm taking someone completely raw, often with limited computer skills. It can be a long time before they earn a penny for me. I can't name another business that will go to these lengths.'

Staff turnover at Summit in HMP Wolds is high as inmates are often released earlier than anticipated, and, as is widely known, the prison service needs the cells. Towards the end of their sentence, the company helps men find a job, advertised on the web or in industry publications. 'Those that work here seem supremely motivated,' Aylott says. 'Guys discover a different path and find the respect they gain is intoxicating. They're loyal and, hey, inside, they don't get headhunted.'

When they leave, not all decide to work for him. Some start their own e-businesses or even get jobs with Summit's clients. One example of a stayer is Robert Barker, 26, who left Wolds last November. He had served 17 and a half months of a five-year sentence for burglary when he moved to Wolds from Armley prison to join Summit two years ago. Now he works in the marketing section at Townend Farm on a salary of £17,000. 'It's changed my life,' he says. 'I was 16 or 17 when I started pinching cars and first went inside. I hope I'm a senior account manager in four years.'



Charlotte Ridley, Summit Media's operations manager at HMP Wolds, is a former prison officer

Across a desk, Lynden Bairstow, 25, from Bradford, is three years into a five-year sentence for causing death by dangerous driving. He had never been in trouble before. At the time of the offence, he had been a trooper in the Royal Dragoon Guards for four and a half years. He is now the head of production for email marketing. 'The Summit training I've been given is invaluable as there isn't much call for Challenger II tank drivers on the outside,' he says.

With heavily tattooed forearms and a shaved head that exposes an unmistakable curved scar over his left ear where someone 'glassed' him, Paul Sherrington looks an unlikely online marketing account manager. 'I'd never even been on the internet before I walked into this building 18 months ago,' he says. Sherrington, 40, from Gateshead, is serving 12 years for holding up a security van at gunpoint four years ago.

He also dealt cocaine and Ecstasy to support a gambling habit - often as much as £2,000-3,000 a week on the horses. 'I was in youth custody at 15 and this is my 26th year in prison,' he says. 'A lot of guys go to prison, sit on their backsides planning their next job and make no changes. Until now, that was me.'

Chris Wilson, 23, a computer programmer from Hull, grins and blushes when I ask him what he is in for because, given everyone wears the same clothes, it is impossible to tell who is who in this seamless mix of prisoners and civilians. He brought his programming skills to Summit voluntarily. 'When I joined a year ago I assumed most weren't inmates until I got to know them,' he says. 'It's hard when you come in after the weekend - you don't know what to tell them if you've had a really good one. They often want to know what I've been up to on the outside.'

Aylott bought the 60-acre Townend Farm with help from his parents. He lives with his German girlfriend, Claudia, a former teacher. At the farm, e-commerce and a string of polo ponies share the same partly converted stable block as the property is also home to a fledgling polo club. Aylott was

transfixed by the game in 2001 when his parents bought him an introductory lesson. He has since built a polo ground at the farm as well as an outdoor arena and some more stables.

The White Rose Polo Club now has 30 members. He could afford to expand his interests at least partly because the business was doing well. He learnt to fly five years ago and now he also stables a secondhand Cessna 172, a modest purchase at £25,000 and a more practical means of getting to meetings with clients up and down the country.

Support from Dave McDonnell, the prison's 61-year-old director, underpins Aylott's Summit operation. With what remains of his silver hair cut in a style not dissimilar to many of those he oversees, McDonnell cuts an almost fatherly figure. 'Initially I was sceptical that Hedley could teach prisoners the level of skills necessary to achieve the results they're now achieving,' he says, 'particularly as 65 per cent of male offenders are below Level 1 in maths and 48 per cent in literacy.'

McDonnell was also aware of the risk of public reaction. 'You get caught up in the argument that some out there think prisoners are being treated too well,' he says. 'That or we are accused of exploiting them as cheap labour or that prisoners are taking jobs from law-abiding members of the community.'

Sensitive to Aylott's concern about the security risks involved in giving prisoners internet and telephone access, McDonnell says, 'We accept that there is an element that might exploit such risks, but we must also remember that 75 per cent of prisoners reoffend within two years of release. This means we must keep finding new ways - ways like this - of influencing offending behaviour. If you can teach prisoners skills that will give them a good future income and a working-day lifestyle, you're 90 per cent of the way to stopping them from reoffending. The work they're doing here is incredible.'