

Helping women succeed in innovative service businesses



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Fédération Pionnières

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In brief

Fédération Pionnières is a network of business incubators which helps women entrepreneurs to establish themselves in innovative service-sector businesses. It was established in 2005, when a gender perspective on business was in its infancy, and women were not expected to be active in business outside the social economy. It aims to enable women from different geographic and social backgrounds to set up successful businesses which will create jobs and added value in innovative services which are particularly attractive for women, thus contributing to economic growth.

Its members provide group training, individual coaching and mentoring, and networking opportunities. So far it has supported 575 women entrepreneurs, and seen 338 new businesses set up. Its success rate is high, with 85% of its clients being successful, against 50% of unaccompanied initiatives. Most of its clients are mothers over 40 years old, who are either unemployed or looking to make a career change.

It works in partnership with employers and other business support services to provide a complementary service. The initiative has proved to be easy transferable to other countries, and apart from its branches across France it has several in other countries..

Filling a policy void

When *Fédération Pionnières* was set up in 2005, the French policy framework for enterprise creation and the development of start-up incubators did not take a gender perspective, especially regarding innovative start-ups. No data were available on the number of women taking part in entrepreneurship support schemes and no specific tools or actions were available to support women who wished to create their own businesses. Women's entrepreneurship was identified with the social and solidarity economy.

Fédération Pionnières decided to change this situation by creating a network of business incubators and providers of innovative solutions for women start-up entrepreneurs. The network was created with the help of the French *Caisse des Dépôts*, the Ministry for SMEs, the Women's Rights Service, the Ile de France region, the city of Paris, BNP Paribas bank, Total, Dell, Ciel (an SME software company), GIP International (a professional training association) and the *Fondation Entreprendre*. The *Pionnières* are established in a number of French regions – Paris, Normandy, Côte d'Azur, Atlantic, Nord, Rhône-Alpes, Bordeaux Aquitaine and Marseille Provence – and the network reaches out internationally in Guyane, Luxembourg, Brussels, Martinique, Belgrade, Morocco and Tunisia. The Paris branch was established in 2005, while the federation was set up in 2008.

The federation's networking activities are based on good evidence of need. The initial project in Paris sprang from the observation that traditional business incubators were only helpful for less than 5% of women who wanted to create their own businesses. They were basically targeted towards high-tech start-ups, while women much more often wanted to start up in the service sector. The *Pionnières* rewrote the rules, exploring innovative areas as well as traditional women's sectors like care and services, and extending support across the different stages of business development, not focusing purely on start-ups.

Increasing women's economic power

The *Pionnières* support women entrepreneurs from the initial idea to the setting up of a business. They aim to enable women from different geographic and social backgrounds to set up successful and lasting businesses, to increase the economic and decision-making power of French women, and to create new jobs and added value in innovative services which are particularly attractive for women, thus contributing to economic growth. Its members provide the following services:

- Individual coaching: each business-creator is guided individually throughout the entire process of setting up her business;
- Group training sessions on topics such as legal and financial issues and management methods;
- Networking to help women entrepreneurs find sources of seed funding, grants and investment, share experiences and give each other mutual support during this crucial phase;
- Mentoring: looking out for mentors who are willing to invest some of their time to help young women entrepreneurs.

They address different target groups of women, though the majority of women the network supports are mothers, unemployed and over 40 years old. Women who are in work but are looking for a more challenging and rewarding career also use the network's services. Women who come to *Fédération Pionnières* do not launch large enterprises, and the average capital initially invested is estimated at just over €50,000.

The federation organises meetings between the incubators so as to identify best practices in supporting business start-ups by women, and stresses concrete results. The meetings create a solid and proactive network of women's start-ups, which offers opportunities for joint business development, interaction and the sharing of experiences and best practices.

85% survival rate

Since the creation of the first incubator for women in 2005, the *Fédération Pionnières* network has been contacted by 3,531 women, of whom 1,737 came for an initial discussion. It has supported 575 women in the pre-start-up phase, and seen 338 businesses actually set up. These have created more than 770 jobs in innovative service sectors. Some 85% of women's businesses that were supported by the *Fédération Pionnières* have been successful, whereas only some 50% of unaccompanied initiatives survive. The initiative has proved to be easy transferable to other countries.

The federation's work has had a wide impact and achieved a high level of sustainability. Of businesses created, 85% of those supported by the *Pionnières* survived against some 50% of unaccompanied initiatives. *Pionnières* has shown that women can create successful and lasting businesses and jobs, provided they have a fair chance and the necessary support. While in 2005 only 5% of French women entrepreneurs were supported by incubators, the figure is now approaching 15%. Even if this is not down to *Pionnières* alone, it illustrates that such an initiative has an impact on other practices. *Pionnières* is frequently asked to present the methodology and tools it uses to support women setting up innovative businesses. Thus, the network has contributed to the gender debate on entrepreneurship in France, and shown that women-driven businesses can develop a new management approach to diversity and gender equality, taking into account the broader economic and social challenges and stimulating the potential of women to develop new professions, new services and new jobs, thus contributing to economic growth.

Fédération Pionnières was the first initiative in France set up specifically to help women to start their own businesses and to create networks for this purpose. Its activities paved the way for a specific commitment from the French government to support women's entrepreneurship. The federation was actively involved in the *Assises de l'Entrepreneuriat* launched in January 2013, which led to the adoption of the Plan for Female Entrepreneurship in August 2013. The plan aims to increase the particularly low share of women entrepreneurs in France by 10 percentage points by 2017. Recognising that the traditional education system does not sufficiently prepare students for the challenge of starting a business, its actions will facilitate women's access to assistance and finance to create or acquire a business. The plan will tackle these shortfalls through three main lines of action: awareness-raising, guidance and information; advice and mentoring; and easier access to finance.

A complementary service

The network's success is due to several factors. First of all, from a mainstreaming point of view, it works closely with all the main actors in the field of entrepreneurship, such as the employers' organisation MEDEF, and not only with those specifically working with women. This partnership helps to put the spotlight on successful women and on the role women can play in economic growth. In addition, by networking, the incubators are able to avoid duplication and to learn from each other's experience in identifying tools and support actions which meet women's needs. The network's communication method focuses on results.

The network has learnt the lesson that it is crucial from the start to involve the key stakeholders in business creation, and to build partnerships with them. It is also important to offer a new type of support that complements existing provision and fills specific gaps identified with reference to local economic realities.

Even given its success, the network still faces obstacles in getting public funding and attracting media attention. Work to support business creation takes time and effort before results can be demonstrated. Thus, there is still a need to convince decision-makers of the need for specific actions to support women entrepreneurs.

Contacts/Further Information

Contacts

Frédérique Clavel, President

26 rue du Chemin Vert

75011 Paris

France

+33 1 44 88 57 70

fclavel@federationpionnieres.org

Further information

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