

Peer support helps women's businesses to grow



In brief

Going for Growth provides structured peer support to women entrepreneurs who are serious about growing their businesses, with mentoring and guidance from lead entrepreneurs who have personal experience of the growth journey on which the participants are embarking. Funded by the ESF, the Irish Department of Justice and Equality and Enterprise Ireland, it has been implemented in Ireland since 2008 by Fitzsimons Consulting, a private company specialising in entrepreneurship and growth.

Six cycles have been held so far, each consisting of six monthly round tables and a national forum at midpoint. Over 350 women entrepreneurs have taken part, at a cost of some €2,000 per head. The participants are not charged a fee for participation in a cycle, however, as the funding support provided covers these costs.

The round table sessions empowered participants to gain a new strategic perspective and to translate this into practical changes within their businesses. This brings them nearer to achieving their growth ambitions and frequently results in revenue growth, additional employment and increased numbers of first-time exporters.

Targeting women who are serious about growth

The Going for Growth initiative was designed by Fitzsimons Consulting, a private company specialising in entrepreneurship and growth, and was launched in 2008. It is directed at ambitious women who are owner-managers of businesses that have been trading for at least two years and are serious about growing their businesses. It provides structured peer support with mentoring and guidance provided by volunteer lead entrepreneurs, who have experience of the growth journey on which the participants are embarking. While more women are being encouraged to start new businesses, the mission of Going for Growth is to get more women entrepreneurs into a growth frame of mind and then to support them to achieve their growth ambitions.

The initiative is funded by the Equality for Women Measure 2010-2013 and by Enterprise Ireland (EI), the government organisation responsible for the development of Irish Enterprises. The Equality for Women Measure (EWM) is funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) through the Human Capital Investment Operational Programme 2007-2013 and the Department of Justice and Equality. The Equality for Women Measure has been involved for many years in other initiatives to inspire, celebrate and encourage women entrepreneurs across Ireland. More recently, in 2012, Enterprise Ireland developed a comprehensive Female Entrepreneurship Strategy which encourages female-led start-up activity in enterprises with growth potential and includes specific female-only funding initiatives.

Although Ireland has a higher proportion of men engaged in entrepreneurial activity compared to women, and a level of female self-employment lower than the EU average, the number of women in Ireland setting up new businesses has begun to increase.

Peer support

Going for Growth operates over a six-month cycle, during which participants are offered a unique learning environment with a peer-led approach based on the sharing of experiences between an experienced lead entrepreneur and other participants facing common challenges. The Going for Growth roundtables are centred on the lead entrepreneurs, who each volunteer about three hours of their time once a month to meet with a small group of women owner-managers. The sessions explore a series of questions related to growth and work through a series of agendas. In this way, the lead entrepreneurs share the practical knowledge they have acquired from their first-hand experience of owning and managing a business that has achieved considerable growth. There are now over 20 successful women who volunteer their time as lead entrepreneurs. This number is increasing all the time.

The lead entrepreneurs have run a very diverse range of businesses, including black pudding making, online gift sales, tourism, environmental analysis, pharmaceuticals, tax recovery, electronics, software development and web marketing.

One participant, Leonora O'Brien of Pharmapod, Laureate for Europe in The Global Cartier Women's Initiative Awards 2013, describes her experience as follows:

"Being involved in Going for Growth was a fantastic opportunity to meet fellow female entrepreneurs; to discuss challenges, share experiences and uncover solutions. The support from the Lead Entrepreneur is goal-focused and practical and the sessions provide a safe, trusted environment and a sense of shared endeavour."

A national forum, held midway through the cycle, is an integral part of Going for Growth. This gives participants the opportunity to go more deeply into a number of topics that all the round table groups consider important. Attendees can also network with participants and lead entrepreneurs from other roundtable groups.

Sales and employment up

The initiative has demonstrated wide impact as it is open to all women entrepreneurs, regardless of sector, and its long-term effects are clearly shown through the achievement of the desired objectives of building up confidence and giving women entrepreneurs an aspiration for growth. Over 350 women entrepreneurs have already taken part.

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Since the fourth cycle, the initiative has captured increases in turnover, employment and new exporters achieved by the participants through questionnaires sent to participants following their completion of the cycle. Over the six months of the latest cycle to be completed (6th cycle), 71% of the participants increased their sales by an average of 15%, employment increased overall by 13% and the number of exporters in the group increased by 22%. A total of 88 new employees were hired and 10 new interns engaged, and over 650 existing jobs were strengthened. The 58 participants had a combined turnover of at least €50m by the end of the cycle.

The impact of the 5th cycle was equally positive: 64% increased their sales by an average of 18%, six broke into exporting, 50 new employees were hired and 570 existing jobs were strengthened. The 56 participants had a combined turnover of at least €41.2m.

Going for Growth has led the way in reducing gender inequalities, as it addresses the gender gap in Irish business by emphasising that women can not only successfully start businesses but should not limit their growth ambitions. Growing businesses benefit women concerned, their communities and the economy more generally.

Not surprisingly, in 2009 Going for Growth was selected by the EU as a good practice in promoting enterprise as part of the European Charter for Small Enterprises, and was subsequently voted into the Top 10 of those initiatives as most beneficial to implement. The initiative was then chosen to represent Ireland in the Investing in Skills category of the European Enterprise Awards 2011. Most recently the initiative has been included as an inspiring practice in the OECD and EU report *The Missing Entrepreneurs: Policies for Inclusive Entrepreneurship in Europe* (2014), which focused on those parts of the population that are under-represented in early stage entrepreneurship, including women.

Action orientation

The success of Going for Growth is mainly related to the fact that the initiative is oriented to action and results and goes beyond classroom style learning and the usual inputs of professional trainers, consultants and academics. Indeed, the roundtables are designed not to be theoretical or academic, but to be based on the experience of what has worked and what hasn't worked in real life. The informal learning environment is one of its main appeals.

The involvement and credibility of high-profile successful women entrepreneurs in the initiative is another key to its success. They act as role models demonstrating through their achievements what is possible for other women entrepreneurs. They become accessible to the participants, and they willingly share their experience and insights. It is interesting that recently several of the lead entrepreneurs have formed a round table for themselves to drive forward the growth of their businesses, as they have seen the Going for Growth approach work for the participants.

The initiative has exceeded all expectations set for it at the outset and, by incorporating evaluation and feedback mechanisms at every stage of the process, has continued to improve and develop over the six cycles that have so far taken place. The next challenge is to implement Going for Growth successfully across Europe, providing a link through which ambitious women entrepreneurs can learn from each other, network and do business together. A pilot has recently been successfully completed in Finland, sponsored by the European Social Fund, the University of Applied Sciences, and the Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment. The Finnish pilot was being directed by Fitzsimons Consulting with local partners.

Contacts/Further Information

Contacts

Paula Fitzsimons

Fitzsimons Consulting

6 James Terrace

Malahide

Co. Dublin

Ireland

+353 1 845 0770

paula@goingforgrowth.com

Further information

[Website](#)



EU and OECD: The Missing Entrepreneurs



Brochure



Video of a National Forum



Testimonials from participants



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EIGE's collection of good practices



EIGE's approach to good practices



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EN (PDF, 223.49 KB)

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