

Blue skies thinking from InnoLady camp



InnoLady Camp

In brief

InnoLady camp is an entrepreneurship training programme for academic women in Finland who are planning to set up their own innovative businesses but are still working as experts or leaders, or are university students. It has been run since 2011 by the Women's Enterprise Agency (Naisyrittäjyyskeskus), one of the 32 Enterprise Agencies which form the Finnish Enterprise Agencies network. It is financed through the Valtava Programme, a national development programme for gender mainstreaming that has been established within the 2007–2013 programming period of the European Social Fund (ESF) and is coordinated by the Finnish Ministry of Employment and the Economy.

The training activities at InnoLady Camp do not take place in a traditional classroom, but in the inspiring and creative atmosphere of the Finnish countryside. It takes place at weekends, when working women are available. The learning methods it uses are based on action learning and peer mentoring. In addition, the InnoLady Camp entrepreneurial training model is complemented and broadened by an innovative web service called InnoLady Cloud. This service enables anyone to develop their business idea at a very early stage by dialoguing with peer participants, mentors, business angels and other users of the Cloud. Out of 40 participants in the first two InnoLady Camps, 31 (77.5%) had set up their own businesses by October 2013.

From academia to business

Research in Finland shows that tertiary-level education decreases entrepreneurial activity among women whereas it increases it for men. The InnoLady Camp initiative aims to stem this trend by providing entrepreneurial training to academic women who have plans to set up innovative businesses. It is thus an important initiative for promoting female entrepreneurship and female entrepreneurial potential and thus narrowing the gender gap in enterprise development among highly educated people in Finland.

It exemplifies good practice in promoting women's entrepreneurship because it focuses on a very specific target group of women who are usually not considered in entrepreneurship programmes, and has a very well-developed training strategy in which the entrepreneurial concept is complemented by innovative web services.

InnoLady Camp is an entrepreneurship training programme for women in the academic world in Finland who are planning to set up their own innovative businesses but are still working as experts or leaders, or are university students. It has been run since 2011 by the Women's Enterprise Agency (Naisyritytjyyskeskus), one of the 32 Enterprise Agencies which form the Finnish Enterprise Agencies network. Established in 1996, the Women's Enterprise Agency is a public-private partnership funded by the Ministry of Employment and the Economy as well as by several private companies. Its mission is to promote entrepreneurship and support existing entrepreneurs in developing their businesses, by providing services for start-ups, entrepreneurship training courses, business mentoring and networking events.

It is financed through the Valtava Programme, a national development programme for gender mainstreaming that has been established within the 2007–2013 programming period of the European Social Fund (ESF) and is coordinated by the Finnish Ministry of Employment and the Economy. Supporting the activities of women with entrepreneurial potential is one of its main objectives, and is at the core of Finland's entrepreneurship and gender equality policies. The female entrepreneurship rate in Finland was 31.4% in 2012 and has remained relatively stable over time. However the rate of women's self-employment has increased slightly (by 0.7 percentage points) since 2007 and was 8.5% in 2012. This rate is below the EU average (10.2 % in 2012) and clearly lower than for Finnish men (17.4 % in 2012).

Inspiration from nature

InnoLady Camp does not take place in a traditional classroom, but in the inspiring and creative atmosphere of the Finnish countryside. So far, 40 women have participated in the training programme at two editions of InnoLady Camp with 30 enterprises involved as mentors. So enthused were they that many participants resigned from their jobs and set up their businesses while the course was under way. By October 2013, 31 of the 40 participants (77.5%) had started up.

Several factors conduced to InnoLady Camp's success. First of all, the training camps were organised at weekends, which enabled those who were at work during the week to take part. As for the chosen training methodologies, action learning as a key method of teaching was particularly effective, as was peer mentoring and effective networking between experienced entrepreneurs and participants. In this way, the initiative embeds both knowledge and effective networking which can be crucial for business start-ups. In addition, the InnoLady Camp model is complemented and broadened by an innovative web service called InnoLady Cloud. This service enables anyone to develop their business idea at a very early stage by dialoguing with peer participants, mentors, business angels and other users of the Cloud. InnoLady Cloud is both a technological and a service innovation.

An efficient and replicable concept

The initiative had a wide impact and a long-term effect in supporting innovative women's enterprises. In addition, as a result of InnoLady Camp, the 'innovation camp' concept (i.e. an entrepreneurial training programme for academic women), has been developed. It includes entrepreneurial counselling, action learning, peer mentoring (through MentorRing), the creation of concrete innovation paths, and business plans. This concept is an important learning tool for supporting the initiative's transfer to other countries. The project has also delivered its results efficiently and at reasonable cost, and after the pilot development of the concept is over, the concept can be replicated even more cheaply.

For these reasons, the InnoLady Camp entrepreneurial training model has already won awards. In 2012 it won the KONSTA award of the Finnish Inventors' Support Association (KEKE ry). The Women's Enterprise Agency, already recognised in 2002 as a model of best practice in promoting women's entrepreneurship in the European Union, in 2009 won the European Enterprise Award in the category of Investing in skills.

Follow-up

A final success factor is related to the fact that, even after the end of the training camps, the Women's Enterprise Agency (Naisyrittäjyyskeskus) still continued to offer business counselling and personal mentoring to the participants.

The implementation of two InnoLady Camps so far has contributed to identifying the main lessons. First of all, the initiative made clear that promoting and supporting women's potential to innovate and launch businesses is important for narrowing gender gaps in the business world. At the same time, supporting the innovation potential of women in business start-ups is also significant from the perspective of stimulating economic growth. From a more practical point of view, the programme showed that it is important to interview applicants for this kind of training, so as to better understand their potential and growth aspirations, not to rely on written applications.

At the moment, the only obstacle to the continuation of this initiative relates to securing financing. There are plans to run InnoLady Camp 2014 by continuing to use financial support from the ESF. Alternatives for future financing include cooperation with the Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment (ELY Centre), with a private investors' network, Finnish Business Angels (FIBAN) and/or with the Finnish University Åbo Akademi from Turku.

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[Naisyrittäjyyskeskus website](#)



[InnoLady Camp presentation video](#)



[Women's Enterprise Agency](#)



[Valtava Gender Mainstreaming Development Programme](#)



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