

Mentoring women entrepreneurs



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Female Entrepreneurs Mentoring Programme

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In brief

The Female Entrepreneurs Mentoring Programme was implemented in Ireland between 2011 and 2013 by a network of five chambers of commerce co-ordinated by Galway Chamber of Commerce with its partners in Dublin, Cork, Waterford and Sligo.

The programme was part of the wider European Network of Mentors for Women Entrepreneurs, supported by the Enterprise DG of the European Commission. It aimed to boost female entrepreneurship, recognise and support the distinctive nature of women's business start-ups and ensure that newly-established women entrepreneurs could sustain their activity. It offered expert mentoring to help women entrepreneurs keep their new businesses going during their first, very challenging years. The programme was open to women of all ages who had been in business for between one and four years and employed at least one person – which proved to be a barrier to recruitment.

The programme was meant as a pilot initiative for Ireland and involved 15 mentors and 30 mentees who met monthly over an entire year. To extend the programme's reach, nine mentoring clinic events were organised in counties not taking part in the programme. The mentoring clinics were very successful and 308 additional mentoring sessions were held as a result of the contacts made.

The programme's success was due to the intensive support given (a ratio of two mentees per mentor) and the wide range of contacts and experience available as a result of being part of national and European networks.

Female Entrepreneurship Strategy

Although Ireland has a much 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. A number of positive actions have been implemented including gender-specific activities conducted by the 35 County and City Enterprise Boards – now Local Enterprise Offices – whose role it is to stimulate economic activity at local level by helping micro-enterprises. In June 2012, Enterprise Ireland, which is the state agency responsible for supporting the development of manufacturing and internationally traded services companies, developed a comprehensive Female Entrepreneurship Strategy to address the challenges facing female entrepreneurs. The strategy outlines a clear commitment to encourage women-led start-ups which includes specific women-only funding. In particular networking activities are deemed to be of particular importance in order to increase the cooperation among public and private actors in supporting women to start their own business.

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The programme aimed to boost female entrepreneurship, recognise and support the distinctive nature of women's business start-ups and ensure that newly-established women entrepreneurs can sustain their activity throughout their first years in business. The network has given women guidance and skills to help them face the many challenges they encounter as entrepreneurs. It was financed directly by the Enterprise DG of the EU Commission as part of the European Network of Mentors for Women Entrepreneurs.

Women of all ages could take part in the programme providing they had either created an SME or taken over an existing one. In addition, women should have been in business for more than a year but less than four, have at least one employee, and have developed their business significantly since starting it.

The five chambers of commerce involved represent Ireland in the Enterprise Europe Network, which comprises nearly 600 business support organisations in 50 countries. They work in partnership to provide Irish small and medium-sized enterprises with information, support and advice on doing business throughout these 50 countries. In addition, the programme is part of the wider European Network of Mentors for Women Entrepreneurs.

The programme exemplifies good practice by giving women a central role in its design and implementation and in its openness to the outside world through the sharing of experience within the mentors' network, which improves the capacity of the Irish network to foster change.

Qualified mentors

The programme offered expert mentoring to women entrepreneurs, to help them keep their new businesses going during their first, very challenging years. Each entrepreneur was matched with a suitable mentor (considering location, business type, etc.) and met him or her each month for an entire year for guidance. A clear outline of the goals and objectives was agreed between both parties to ensure that the best results could be achieved. Mentors could be men or women, and had to have personal experience of owning and managing a small or medium-sized business successfully for at least five years, be aware of specific challenges that women entrepreneurs face (e.g. in starting a business, accessing finance, networking and balancing family and business). They undertook to share their knowledge and know-how with their mentees and be available to meet them regularly for a minimum of one year. Mentors were identified through a nationwide public announcement and, once selected, received specialised training and joined the European Network of Mentors for Women Entrepreneurs.

In addition to the one-to-one mentoring, mentoring clinics took place throughout Ireland, providing all entrepreneurs with the opportunity to have individual consultations with mentors on specific aspects of their business. The clinics were usually held as one-day events run in association with key public or private actors and organisations such as the Business and Professional Women's Association (BPW). They enabled women start-up entrepreneurs to attend one-to-one mentoring clinics with three or four mentors on the day. Running parallel to the mentoring clinics were rotating workshops led by representatives from organisations that the Chambers of Commerce network identified for each event. Registration for the mentoring clinics was open to the public on a first-come-first-served basis. Due to the limited number of places available on the mentoring programme, a selection process was in place. The selection committee evaluated applications from women entrepreneurs on criteria including area of business expertise, geographical location and business sector.

The programme gave many women entrepreneurs the benefit of having an experienced mentor to support them in developing their businesses in a sustained way. Participation in the mentoring sessions empowered participants by providing an opportunity for attendees to network with other participants and build up a relationship with their mentors. The programme has now ended, but the contacts thus created are still in force and will contribute to the future sustainability of the initiatives. Its efficiency took advantage of the networking experience and possibilities offered by the national and European networks involved.

The programme was meant as a pilot initiative for Ireland and involved 15 mentors and 30 mentees who received support for an entire year. Moreover nine mentoring clinic events were organised in counties not directly represented in the programme which gave the network the opportunity to boost its activities throughout the country and to reach women entrepreneurs who could not take part in the pilot programme. The mentoring clinics were very successful and 308 additional mentoring sessions were held as a result of the contacts made during the events.

Intensive support

The programme's success mainly relates to the way mentoring was provided. The ratio of one mentor for just two mentees allowed strong and very supportive relationships to be forged, and the mentoring sessions were distributed through an entire year. The involvement of five chambers of commerce distributed throughout the country allowed the scheme to reach women entrepreneurs in different areas. Being part of the European Network of Mentors for Women Entrepreneurs allowed the mentors to offer more networking opportunities and to share their experience.

In terms of lesson learnt, the high success of mentoring clinics events proved that there is a real need for women entrepreneurs to receive mentoring and to be part of a network that can provide direct support and information. In addition, being part of a network that covers the country contributes to the initiative's effectiveness. However limiting access to the programme to women entrepreneurs who had at least one employees proved to be an obstacle to finding suitable mentees, because women in business in Ireland are more likely to be self-employed with no employees.

Contacts/Further Information

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Further information

[Website](#)



[Mentoring clinic agenda](#)



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<https://www.localenterprise.ie/Galway/Training-Events/Mentoring/>

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Mentoring women entrepreneurs - Ireland

EN (PDF, 128.76 KB)

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