

Going for Growth, Ireland

This case study presents a project that uses role models to inspire and support women entrepreneurs in setting and achieving growth objectives for their businesses. The case study presents the objectives and rationale for this approach and describes the activities and impact that has been made. It also discusses the challenges faced and the conditions for transferring this approach to another context.

Objectives

Going for Growth is focused on encouraging women entrepreneurs to be ambitious in respect of their businesses and then supports them to achieve their growth aspirations. It seeks to bridge the gap whereby more men than women have significant growth aspirations for their businesses. This has economic, social and equality implications, as the entrepreneurial effort of many female entrepreneurs has a lower return than that of their male counterparts.

Rationale

A focused intervention was considered necessary as research indicated that not only do women in Ireland start new enterprises at a much lower rate than men, but fewer grow their businesses, remaining as self-employed sole traders or very small micro-enterprises (GEM, 2013). Women tend to be less confident in entrepreneurship, less perceptive of entrepreneurial opportunities and have less developed networks than men and accordingly, a smaller proportion of female entrepreneurs has significant growth ambitions (GEM, 2013).

Recognising that the economic and employment impact of the small number of enterprises that achieve significant growth is very substantial, the European Commission recognised the importance of supporting existing businesses to realise their potential for growth in a Green Paper in 2003 (EC, 2003). In response to this challenge, Going for Growth was developed in 2008 in response to a call for proposals from the Gender Equality Unit in the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, which aimed to sponsor initiatives in the area of women and entrepreneurship. The pilot cycle was implemented in 2009 to encourage a greater number of female entrepreneurs to have an ambition for growth, to be supported to grow their existing businesses and to achieve their growth aspirations. The initiative was intended to bring about an increase in the economic, societal and personal impact of their entrepreneurial activity. 6 cycles have been completed.

Activities

Entrepreneurs often learn most effectively from each other. Accordingly, Going for Growth is based on interactive round tables that are facilitated, not by consultants, academics or professional trainers, but by successful entrepreneurs. These are referred to

as “Lead Entrepreneurs”. Participants are offered a unique learning environment with a peer-led approach based on the shared experiences of both the Lead Entrepreneur and the other participants facing common challenges.

Going for Growth is action- and results-oriented. It is based on experience of what worked and what has not worked in real-life situations. The participants are supported in taking a strategic approach to the development of their businesses by focusing on growth goals and time-defined milestones.

Lead Entrepreneurs

Going for Growth leverages the contribution of successful female entrepreneurs, who act as “Lead Entrepreneurs”. There are currently 28 Lead Entrepreneurs associated with the initiative, including 2 former participants. Each person volunteers their time. The most important attributes of the Lead Entrepreneurs are that they have experience of growing a business. In addition, the Leads have an understanding of how to apply their experience to other businesses and have strong listening and communication skills. The Project Director and experienced Lead Entrepreneurs assist new Leads in preparing for their role and provide training on the Going for Growth methodology.

Going for Growth is centred on facilitated group sessions, where Lead Entrepreneurs share their knowledge and experience with the group. The Leads also act as role models, demonstrating that a woman can build a successful business while having family and other responsibilities. Although the participants have no role in selecting the Lead Entrepreneur who facilitates their group, participant feedback surveys demonstrate that more than 90% of participants considered that their Lead was appropriate for them: between the second and sixth project cycles, the reported satisfaction rates were 90%, 92%, 98%, 96%, and 98%.

Participant profile

There have been 60 participants in each of the cycles to date, drawn from all regions of the country. The emphasis is on small numbers of committed participants who have a clear aspiration for growth, who value the opportunity and who will commit to attending all the round table sessions and the National Forum (see below).

In order for candidates to be considered eligible for the scheme, the entrepreneurs must already be the owner-manager of a business, of which they are a major shareholder and key decision maker, which has been trading for at least 2 years. They must also be working full-time in the business. More recently, a smaller number of applications from candidates with less than 2 years of revenue were considered on an exceptional basis if the new business was considered to be highly innovative with significant growth potential.

To apply to the scheme, candidates complete an application form which outlines their current position in terms of sales, employment and market focus and where they would like to be in 5 years. They are asked what their current barriers to growth are, how they believe that participation in the initiative would assist them, and what would constitute success over the course of the cycle for them. They then outline in 500 words or less the development of their business to date and their vision for its future growth and development. Finally, in 250 words or less, they outline the reasons that they became an entrepreneur.

More applications are received than there are places available, therefore a selection process involving the Lead Entrepreneurs takes place. The Leads come together to review

the applications and each selects 8 female entrepreneurs to invite to her table. Acceptance into the scheme is based on this written application; there is no interview.

The round table sessions

There is a common agenda focused on growth that guides the discussion during each of the round table sessions over the cycle. The Lead Entrepreneur shares her experiences and thoughts on the question under discussion. The other participants similarly share their experiences and learn from each other. The Lead Entrepreneurs have a central role in nurturing the trust that develops within the group. The round table sessions take place once per month between January and June. All matters discussed remain confidential.

Going for Growth website

The Going for Growth website (www.goingforgrowth.com/) provides comprehensive information on the scheme and how it can be accessed. Information is provided on the different projects under Going for Growth and there is a member's only section that facilitates networking.

The National Forum

Midway through the project cycle, a National Forum is held at which all participants are expected to attend. The National Forum is designed to allow participants and Lead Entrepreneurs the opportunity to explore a number of topics that all the round table groups consider important to their current situation and want to explore further. Presentations on particular topics are followed by Lead-facilitated discussion around the tables. These discussions focus on applying the learning taken from the various presentations.

The National Forum is associated with a particular cycle and is confined to the participants of that cycle. The numbers at the Forum are therefore held to about 70, as the participants are joined by their Leads. Representatives of the sponsors join in the late afternoon and remain for the dinner. There is also a Community Forum held in the autumn. The numbers attending this would be higher as it is open to the full panel of Leads and all past participants, who are members of the Going for Growth Community.

As well as providing more in-depth coverage of key topics, the National Forum provides an opportunity for attendees to network with participants and Lead Entrepreneurs from other round table groups.

Monitoring and evaluation

Ongoing monitoring and evaluation is integrated into the structure of Going for Growth. Both Leads and participants are actively engaged in providing detailed information and feedback throughout the cycle and at its conclusion.

A report is written after the recruitment and selection process, which includes a detailed analysis of the candidates selected in terms of their current turnover, employment levels and export activity. Their aspirations in respect of each of these headings are detailed. These are compared to previous cycles. The barriers to growth identified by the participants in their application forms are also highlighted. This report is circulated to the Lead Entrepreneurs and to the sponsors. Each Lead is also given a detailed breakdown of the participants on her table and their aspiration.

At the end of the cycle, each Lead is informed of the combined progress made by the participants on her table relative to the norm across all the tables. Individual feedback from

each of the Leads is sought. The Leads also meet as a group to discuss what worked well in the cycle and what aspects need improving.

A detailed review is written at the end of each cycle, which draws on all the information collected. Qualitative outcomes are outlined. As information in respect of sales, employment and export activity is captured (i.e. self-reported) at the beginning and end of the cycle, tangible impacts in terms of these outcomes can be ascertained. Differences across cycles are noted. Recommendations for future cycles are made. This is shared with the Leads involved in the cycle and circulated to the sponsors.

Project development

Entrepreneurs supporting entrepreneurs has been the central element of Going for Growth since the beginning. The key elements implemented in the pilot have remained fairly consistent but over the years, the number of those applying to participate in the initiative has greatly increased as Going for Growth has become more widely known. Competition for a place is now much greater than in the early years.

Based on the feedback from previous participants and from the Leads, complementary initiatives have been developed to provide continuing support, appropriate to an entrepreneur's stage of development.

- **The Development of a Going for Growth Community.** On successful completion of a cycle participants are now being given the opportunity to stay connected and to continue to drive forward the growth of their business by becoming members of the Going for Growth Community. Members of the community have the opportunity to participate on a **Continuing the Momentum** round table, attend topic-based workshops and are invited to an annual Community Forum in the autumn. A special area of the website has been developed to facilitate members' communication and networking. Participants pay a small annual membership fee (EUR 300 in 2015) and the Community is reaching the point of being self-sustaining.
- **Leads Round Table.** As the Leads Entrepreneurs have seen at first hand the success of the round tables in supporting the growth of participants' businesses, they have decided to put in place a round table to facilitate their supporting each other in a structured manner to drive forward the growth of their businesses. These meetings take place 3 times per year.
- **Starting Strong** is the most recent in the suite of complementary initiatives and is designed for ambitious female entrepreneurs who are at an early stage in the development of their business. It was developed and tested at the time of the 6th cycle (2014). The businesses will typically be in the early-revenue or pre-revenue stage, but will have moved well beyond the concept stage. Starting Strong is aimed at female entrepreneurs, whose length of pre-revenue development, degree of innovation and growth potential are all significantly above average. The peer-to-peer learning approach is similar to Going for Growth but has been tailored to reflect the particular needs of those at an early stage of development. Sponsorship from the corporate sector to provide additional tailored supports, including workshops, has been recently secured. There are currently 24 participants on 3 Starting Strong round tables.

Project financing

The average cost per participant in a cycle of Going for Growth is less than EUR 2 000 for the 6-month cycle. The costs of the initiative have been held low as the Lead Entrepreneurs contribute their time on a voluntary basis and cover their own expenses. There is no charge to entrepreneurs for participation in Going for Growth.

Going for Growth has been funded since its inception by the Equality for Women Measure and by Enterprise Ireland, the Government organisation responsible for the development and growth of Irish enterprises. Annually, an average of EUR 48 000 has been received from the Equality for Women Measure, which is financed by the European Social Fund through the Human Capital Investment Operational Programme and the Department of Justice and Equality, over the period from 2010 to 2014 inclusive. In 2015, KPMG also became a sponsor.

Challenges encountered

Securing funding for the initiative has been a challenge. Going for Growth was designed and developed at the very start of the economic crisis and subsequent recession. Public sector budgets were severely constrained. The initiative has relied largely on public funding but growth of the scheme has stretched an already small budget. In 2015, the corporate sector became more involved in providing financial support, which facilitates the development of the complementary initiatives.

Another challenge has been the identification of a cohort of ambitious women entrepreneurs. There are many networks of women entrepreneurs and business women in Ireland so it was difficult to differentiate the project from others and to attract suitably ambitious women. The reputation of the Lead Entrepreneurs was important in initially providing credibility and in generating interest in the initiative so as to encourage a suitable field of candidates to apply. As the reputation of Going for Growth and media coverage have grown, registrations on the website now happen throughout the year. The growing number of past participants acts as ambassadors for the initiative, having experienced themselves the benefits of participation. The number and quality of the applications and the level of ambition evident among those applying are higher in recent years than they were at the outset.

While Lead Entrepreneurs are essential to the project, they also present a two-fold challenge: to maintain their number and calibre on the one hand and their involvement and commitment on the other. Female entrepreneurs of the highest reputation and profile were approached when the pilot was being planned. Their sustained commitment has acted as a reference to others being approached to volunteer. Over time it has become clear that the Leads are enthused by the progress that they observe the participants make over the cycle. They are centrally involved in reviewing and developing the initiative, and have developed a very strong network among themselves.

Impact

Going for Growth is now in its 7th cycle. More than 400 ambitious female entrepreneurs have been supported to raise their ambition and enhance their capability to achieve significant business growth. Participant testimonials attest to the benefits gained.

From client feedback and testimonials, Going for Growth managers report that participants have benefited from increased motivation, improved strategic positioning and

reduced psychological isolation. At the end of the 6th cycle, 93% of the participants indicated that they felt nearer to achieving their growth ambitions; 95% indicated that the round table sessions translated into practical change in their businesses; 100% intended to stay in contact with the other participants in their group; and 100% would recommend the scheme to others.

The impact can also be measured in increased turnover, additional employment created and in numbers of first-time exporters. Over 70% of the participants who completed the 6th cycle experienced a growth in sales over the 6-month period. The average growth was 15%. During this period, an additional 88 individuals were employed, which is an increase of 13% overall. In addition, 10 interns were engaged. There was a 22% increase in the number of exporters among the participants.

From the pilot, as part of its objective to encourage greater ambition among female entrepreneurs, whether they participated in the initiative or not, Going for Growth has orchestrated a significant public relations campaign, involving the Lead Entrepreneurs and participants, for many years. By their actions, these entrepreneurs demonstrate that growth is possible and act as role models to others. They feature not only in the traditional and digital media, at national and local level, but are available to talk at various events where a number of female entrepreneurs are gathered.

Going for Growth won the European Enterprise Promotion Award 2015 in the Investing in Skills Category.

Conditions for transfer

Going for Growth has already been transferred to other contexts (Box 12.1).

Box 12.1. The 2014 Going for Growth pilot round table in Finland

Going for Growth was implemented with one round table as a pilot in Finland in 2014. This pilot was funded by the European Social Fund, The Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment and Oulu University. Anne Berner, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Oy Vallila Interior Ab, acted as the voluntary Lead Entrepreneur.

The Lead and 8 participants from Finland joined the 6th cycle participants and Lead Entrepreneurs from Ireland at the Going for Growth National Forum in March. From the end-of-cycle survey, it is clear that all the participants from Finland considered their participation to have been very beneficial. Over the course of the cycle, 50% of the Finnish participants grew their turnover by an average of 14.6% and employment increased by 9%. All indicated that they felt nearer to achieving their growth goals as a result of their participation.

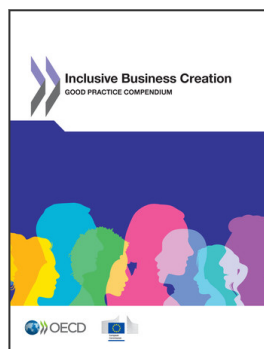
The experience of running Going for Growth in Finland has demonstrated that the initiative can be transferred across borders. Keys to successfully transferring this initiative to another context are:

1. *Obtain initial financing to set up the project structure.* Some financing will be required to promote the initiative, set up a communication structure and allow for the organisation of national or regional forums.
2. *Appoint a project co-ordinator.* It is critical to have a motivated co-ordinator who can identify and attract Lead Entrepreneurs to participate in the initiative, promote the initiative and support the development of the network.

3. *Identify quality Lead Entrepreneurs.* Having high-quality Lead Entrepreneurs will determine the success of the scheme. It is important to develop selection criteria for the Lead Entrepreneurs to ensure that they have an appropriate level of experience and success. This will help make the scheme attractive to potential participants. However, the criteria cannot be so strict that volunteer Leads are discouraged from becoming involved.
4. *Design and implement an appropriate selection process for participants.* The Irish experience shows that demand for participation in the initiative exceeds the number of available slots. To maximise impact, participants should be selected according to their motivations and their business' potential for growth. It is important to include women entrepreneurs who are open to growth but not yet achieving it.
5. *Use a champion(s) to promote the scheme.* The popularity of the initiative in Ireland is due to two factors. First, both participants and Lead Entrepreneurs have been acting as champions and promoting the initiatives whenever they can. Having this support from those involved in the initiative helps send a credible message to those who may be potentially interested in participating. As the same time, the Irish initiative has benefited from extensive press coverage. It is therefore important to have a communication plan and to co-ordinate at least some of the outreach efforts by the champions.
6. *Use monitoring to assess the impact.* Going for Growth closely monitors the business activities of participants and continually seeks to improve the support offerings. This includes informal monitoring as well as a regular survey at the end of each cycle. It is important to benchmark the progress and to feedback these results into the initiative.

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