



WP 6 The analysis of Women Resource
Centers' potential as actors increasing
women's participation in SME, Innovation
and Economic Growth

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The aim of this study is to present the essence and to evaluate the WRC model and the BST method, and to prove the thesis that they form an effective system of support for business relations and cooperation between women.

The research has been coordinated by the Winnet Centre of Excellence - the international network of researchers in the Baltic Sea Region for the purpose of doing and promoting policy oriented research on Gender, Innovation and Growth

Introduction

Stable and lasting relations are a prerequisite for effective business cooperation. Therefore, it is important to promote good practice as an incentive to create networks of contacts based on the ethical norms of conduct. This article presents the subject including theoretical and empirical research.

Theoretical considerations are devoted to the description of the concept of social capital. The network of relations constitutes its integral part. This part of the article describes also the principles of cooperation which enable generating profits and indicates that the style of management, convergent with those principles, is attributed to women. Such conduct of women in business corresponds with the modern forms of businesses.

The empirical part presents initiatives that support women cooperation. The first one was the Women Resource Centre model (hereafter referred to as WRC), including the history of creation and main objectives, then the WINNET Europe organization that associates the European WRCs. An important part of the analysis is the description of the process of creating networks of business contacts based on the Business Success Team method (hereafter referred to as BST), which involves organizing a series of meetings with well-defined structure. Special attention is put on the importance of acting according to the principle of quadruple Helix.

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1.

Business cooperation and building relations by women

Social ties and networks are part of the multifaceted concept of social capital which is generating many positive effects [Fukuyama, 2003, pp. 197]. Social capital consists of the sum of resources, both current and potential, which are possessed by a group or unit through a fixed, more or less institutionalized network of relations, contacts and acquaintances [Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 248]. Connecting trust as a necessary element to build the network of relations with the concept of social capital was noted by Coleman [1990, pp. 302] and Putnam [1997, pp. 258]. The literature on the subject also emphasizes that the multiplication of the possessed welfare tends to be more likely in groups which functioning is not only based on trust, but also reciprocity, sensitivity and open communication [Golinowska, 2011, pp. 14].

The theory of human capital indicates the importance of such concepts as relations, the ability to build and sustain them through ethical conduct, reputation, knowledge sharing, trust and cooperation, which results in the generation of multilateral advantages [Trutkowski, Manades, 2005, pp. 50; Preston, 2004, pp. 43-49]. The functioning of the Swedish WRC model of cooperation is based on similar principles [Hozer-Koćmiel, Misiak, Torstensson, 2013, pp. 327-350].

It is worth to note that the conduct based on the above principles is attributed to the modern management style [Rudawska, 2007, pp. 39]. Such management style, based on partnership and teamwork, is assigned in the literature to women, and it is more adjusted to modern forms of businesses [Rosener, 2003, pp. 349-352; Peters, 2005, pp. 275]. Women in business are focused on ensuring good relations,

cooperation, quality, meeting the needs of customers and treating the human capital as the main resource; they are also characterized by empathy [Lisowska, 2009, pp. 44; Misiak, 2013, pp. 41-56]. Therefore, it is important to show in practice how business cooperation is carried out between women, taking into consideration as good practice the WRC model and the BST method, based on which the model works.

Creating structures and carrying out activities dedicated exclusively to women can be controversial. The authors are of the opinion that women and men in some respects are equal and in some different, while a part of these differences should be levelled e.g. differences in wages, and some not, e.g. differences in management styles. The differences that should be preserved can be described as positive diversities [Hozer, 2007, pp. 6]. The creation of a neutral meeting place enables developing those diversities, and thus, developing business talents of half the population - women's talents [Hozer-Koćmiel, Zimoch, 2012, pp. 3-19].

2.

Supporting business cooperation of women in practice

The WRC model is an institution created in Sweden in the eighties in order to activate and strengthen the position of women on the labor market. Currently about 150 centres operate there within several networks. One of the most important is WINNET Sverige (WINNET Sweden), which includes centres operating at national, regional and local levels. Organization and operation methods of existing centres are various, but most of them focus on supporting women's entrepreneurship and innovation. The name 'WINNET' is an acronym derived from the expression 'women in net' and also a combination of words 'win' and 'net' which create the meaning of the network of success.

In order to secure the proper functioning of the Swedish WRC a national fund ensuring basic funding was created. Funds are distributed by the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (Tillväxtverket). WRCs apply for the basic funds for the period of three years - those resources cover the fixed costs of running the office. In this way, the risk of closure of an effective WRC as a result of the lack of liquidity caused by e.g. the end of the project is significantly reduced. In addition to the basic funding provided by the Swedish State, the employees of WRC systematically apply for funds to implement planned activities. It may happen that a certain WRC will not get funds for the further period due to the low quality of its action plan. The fund of basic funding was created as a result of the actions of people associated with WRC.

Among the objectives of WRCs one can define:

1. strengthening the social and economic position of women,
2. establishing a neutral place for business meetings among women,
3. creation of a place where one can find a variety of information and gather documents,
4. counselling and support in the implementation of business projects,
5. mediation in contacts between the groups of women (Lindberg, 2011).

In 2007 the association WINNET Europe was established, which members are WRCs from many European countries - Sweden, Finland, Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Greece, Portugal and Italy.

The association was created as a result of the W.IN.NET project financed by the INTERREG IIIC program. The Swedish model attracts great interest in countries outside the European Union. The Winnet Sverige organization recently has established cooperation with Armenia, specifically with the association supporting women called Goris. The headquarters was also visited by the Chinese delegation as a study visit.

In the WRC model the cooperation between public administration, business, non-governmental organizations and academic community is crucial. This type of action is referred to as the realization of the principle of Quadruple Helix, according to which all of the aforementioned entities should be simultaneously involved in improving the social and economic situation of women [Lindberg, Lindgren, Packendorff 2012]. Building relations between the institutions that represent mentioned environments is not easy, but WRCs are prepared for such activities, which constitutes great significance for practice.

The WRC in Szczecin in cooperation with the University of Szczecin realized in 2010-2011 the project WINNET8 (INTER-REG IVC program, priority 1. Economy, Innovation, Technology). The result of the project was the Action Plan for the West Pomeranian Province called 5 steps towards equality in the region. The aim of the proposed actions

was to increase the activity of women on the West Pomeranian labor market with special focus on innovation, entrepreneurship and new technologies. It was emphasized that the ICT sector is one the most dynamically developing sectors of the economy and participation in it will allow women to have an influence on the economic growth and mitigation of the effects of the economic crisis [Hozer-Kocmiel, Zimoch 2010].

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One of the methods used by WRCs is the BST method, developed in the USA by Barbara Sher and based on the creation of business contact networks. According to its assumptions, a group of a few, optimally from five to eight, businesswomen meets once a month to motivate and assist each other in the management and development of their businesses. They learn how to efficiently run a business and develop it successfully. Their cooperation is based on mutual motivation and exchange of experience [Sher Smith, 1995].

The main objectives of the BST method are:

1. assistance in defining business goals,
2. supporting the company's development and
3. organization of a group within which the members provide each other advice and suggestions concerning business activities.

The organization of BST meetings consists of three stages. First, information workshops are organized in order to familiarize entrepreneurs with the work method. During the meeting, the participants present themselves and their business or a business idea. They find out what is the method, how it can help them develop the business and establish business contacts. There is also a brief presentation of the history of the BST method.

Then follows a cycle of 'proper' meetings of the BST group - usually 6 or 12 meetings, depending on the schedule of the project. Every meeting consists of round of talks with precisely defined structure. The participants in turn preside over the meetings and make notes, a copy of which is sent after the meeting to all participants. The register of the meeting includes information about the time and place of the meeting, the participants, the tasks for the next meeting and the discussed matters.

Each BST session lasts from two to three hours and consists of three rounds: start, relevant support and setting the task for the next meeting.

Round 1 - Start, lasts about 5 minutes for each participant, during which they describe the progress of their work since the last meeting. They also report briefly on the achieved results. Everyone shortly summarizes the problems that have been resolved or that require more involvement.

Round 2 – Relevant support, lasts approximately 15 minutes for each person. The aim is the joint assessment of difficult issues and situations and finding appropriate solutions. Participants discuss and advise each on the methods of solving the problems.

During Round 3 - Setting the task, which lasts approximately 5 minutes for each person, the participants set themselves the task - specific objectives, which they want to accomplish in the near future, until the next meeting. These objectives are recorded in the register, which gives them a concrete form and facilitates their implementation [Buchmüller, Bannuscher, Nilsson, 2013].

The last stage, which follows the completion of all planned meetings, is the assessment of how the cooperation within the BST influenced the development of each of the participants.

The BST method is currently used in Germany, Sweden, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland. At the University of Szczecin there are 3 groups formed under the project Going Abroad funded by the South Baltic program. In cooperation with student organizations also a group for female students of economics who want to run or already run their own business is being created.

On the international level German organizations are particularly active, including "Frauen in die Wirtschaft" - the WRC in Rostock. The leader of the organization C. Bannuscher popularized the BST method in the Baltic countries by introducing new solutions - together with her husband they created BST groups for men and mixed groups. With the Swedish partners international BST groups were organized that consist of businesswomen operating in Germany, Sweden, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Internationalization of the activities proceeded efficiently. Long-term business contacts were established, especially related to handicraft trade.

The BST method and previously described WRC model are subjects of the increasing interest of researchers [Lindberg, 2011]. Thanks to the cooperation with the organization WINNET Sverige in 2014 at the Faculty of Economics, University of Szczecin the WINNET Centre of Excellence for Gender Researchers was established – the WCE.

The activities are financed by the Swedish Institute under the project TP Winnet BSR. The WCE coordinates the research network of the Baltic Sea Region countries, created to conduct and promote research on gender in economics with a special focus on innovation and sustainable development. The team includes, among others, Elisabeth Sundin - Linköping University; Åsa Löfström - University of Umeå, Ewa Gunnarsson - Luleå University of Technology; Ewa Rumińska-Zimny and Ewa Lisowska - Warsaw School of Economics; Dorota Witkowska - University of Łódź, Aleksandra Matuszewska-Janica – Warsaw University of Life Sciences. Both authors of this article are the members and at the same time the coordinators of the created organization.

We should aware that the WRC model and the BST method may also have some negative sides. Creating WRC generates costs associated with building new structures, so it is worth to consider using already existing structures, such as universities or city, county and municipality councils. In Poland, the chances of a quick establishment of the national fund for basic funding are rather small.



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The use of BST method may also raise doubts, which include mainly small operational range or the existence of many other forms of support (coaching, mentoring). It should also be remembered that in difficult cases, it is necessary to use the services of a professional adviser and members of the BST groups will not always be able to find a solution (e.g. legal, tax advice). Another imperfection is the resignation from the exchange of experiences between women and men, since most groups are organized for women. However, when the BST network is extensive, it is possible, by using the innovations implemented by the German partners, to expand the actions taken and to involve men into cooperation. Taking into account the long-term, effective use of the WRC model and the BST method (for example in Sweden), it is possible to conclude that there are considerably more positive aspects than the negative ones.

Summary

The purpose of the article was to describe and evaluate the Women Resource Centre model and the Business Success Team method. Based on our research, the thesis that they form an effective system of support for business cooperation and relations between women was positively verified.

The authors also formulated the following recommendations regarding the described issues:

1. Establishing a network of WRC in Poland - neutral business meeting places for women, based on the Swedish model adapted to Polish economic situation. It is possible to use the existing national network of care centers and community centers.
2. The organization of BST meetings, during which women receive a multi-dimensional support within the scope of their business activities.
3. Mediation in international relations between groups of women operating in the Polish WRCs and abroad, particularly in Sweden and Germany. Promoting relations can be performed using the BST method.

Implementation of the proposed recommendations will certainly improve the relations and business cooperation of women in Poland.

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