

Prowess, United Kingdom

This case study presents an example of how business development support organisations can be accredited to ensure that they deliver high quality support. The description presents the objectives and rationale for this approach and describes how it worked. Data are provided to illustrate the impact that this project had. The case study also discusses the challenges faced in implementing this type of action and the conditions needed to transfer it to another context.

Objectives

Prowess is a membership network of organisations that deliver women-friendly business start-up support across the United Kingdom. It was established in 2002 with the support of the government as the UK National Association for the Promotion of Women's Enterprise, a "company limited by guarantee", and operated in this form until 2011. It was commissioned to produce the first national strategy for women's enterprise and quality standards for women's enterprise support. At its peak, Prowess had over 350 member organisations, which between them supported over 100 000 women business owners.

In addition, Prowess was instrumental in lobbying government to set up the Women's Enterprise Panel and the Women's Enterprise Task Force, which helped to retain a policy focus on women's enterprise during a period of frequent political leadership changes in the government department for business. It also produced a range of training materials, best practice reports and quality standards for business support services that provided assistance to women entrepreneurs. The most well-known of the quality standards was the Flagship Award which is intended to measure the quality of business support from a "women friendly" perspective.

The Prowess company was closed in 2012, due to government budget cuts, but the former CEO purchased its assets and re-launched Prowess as a social enterprise. It has since re-invented itself with a stronger focus on support from private sector actors. For example, it has developed The Charter for Women in Business, which is a code of practice, training and marketing tool for organisations that wish to support more women to start, sustain and grow successful businesses. In this way, it continues to act as a network for connecting local providers of women-friendly business support.

Rationale

In the United Kingdom, women entrepreneurs were responsible for approximately one-third of business start-ups in the early 2000s. They were clearly under-represented among new business owners. While this has changed markedly over the last decade – women are now responsible for more than 50% of new start-ups – women-led businesses

tend to be under-capitalised and operate in a more limited set of lower value-added sectors (Eurostat, 2015).

In the early 2000s, the Small Business Service recognised that business support services were not reaching enough women and other social target groups (e.g. women, young people, immigrants, people with disabilities). Business support services often failed to encourage women to pursue self-employment and did not recognise their economic potential.

Prowess was set up as a network of business support organisations involved in support for female entrepreneurship. It was launched during a period when the government was pursuing a policy of developing specialist agencies to support particular target groups. Women were the largest of these target groups and a range of agencies, both local and national were established during this period. While some continue to exist, including the Women's Business Development Agency, many of the activities have been brought back into mainstream programmes and agencies, scaled back or come to an end. There is nevertheless still a significant group of business support organisations interested in sharing materials and good practices in women's enterprise support.

Activities

Although Prowess has engaged in a wide range of activities including advocacy and lobbying at national and regional levels and providing support services to its member organisations (e.g. annual events), one of its greatest contributions was the Prowess Flagship Award. The designation was designed to recognise women-friendly business support services as part of a project financed by the Phoenix Development Fund, which was a national fund focusing on enterprise development in disadvantaged areas and in groups that were under-represented in enterprise.

The Flagship Award is a designation based on a set of 12 criteria against which mainstream and specialist women's business support providers can be assessed. The Prowess Board drew up the criteria and tried to encapsulate best practice in women's enterprise support. The 12 standards for business support providers fit across 4 key areas of inclusion, equality, client focus and quality (Table 22.1).

Assessments were conducted by Prowess of all of its member organisations. Each assessment included a site visit where a small team from Prowess would meet with the organisation and some of its clients to assess its activities against the 12 criteria.

Of the 68 organisations that were assessed in the first round of assessments, 6 were awarded Flagship Member Status. In addition, 9 member organisations were networks and were assessed against slightly different criteria. 2 members were awarded Flagship Network Member Status. There are currently 24 organisations that have been awarded one of the Flagship Awards.

Since 2011, the Flagship Award has ceased under Prowess 2.0. It was replaced by the Charter for Women in Business, which is a code of practice, marketing and training tool for providers of business support and services that assist women in starting and growing businesses. The Charter builds on the Prowess Flagship Awards and the work of other leaders in this field (e.g. Small Firms Enterprise Development Initiative, the Women's Business Centres International Standard) but goes further by providing a code of practice for staff and training in addition to its optional accredited level.

Table 22.1. **Prowess Flagship Standards**

	Standard	Rationale
1	The service provider regularly delivers services through face-to-face meetings.	A lack of confidence is an issue for a lot of women starting their own business. In the early stages, face-to-face services are crucial. Regular face to face services will also build trust and help ensure that businesses feel that they can help shape the service.
2	The service provider has offered targeted supported for women for at least one year.	Reflecting on experience and feedback from clients is an important part of the process of designing a quality programme of women's business support.
3	The service provider assists a minimum of 50 women business owners per year (30 in remote areas).	Quality programmes need to be committed to effective programme design and delivery. It is important to reach the target clients.
4a	The service provider disaggregates client statistics by gender, ethnicity, disability and any other relevant characteristic that identifies disadvantaged and under-represented groups and the service provider reaches an adequate number of these social groups.	To effectively target market segments, it is important to understand the clients and how to reach them.
4b	The service provider is committed to serving diverse communities	A strategic mission is needed to ensure a sustainable service.
5	The service provider is client-focused and constantly seeks to improve their services and meet client needs. It has methods for listening to clients' experience and concerns.	Best practice organisations listen to clients and act on feedback. It is important to have procedures such as social audits or client surveys.
6	The service provider has an active outreach programme (e.g. talks/visits to places women go).	Many women do not consider themselves to be "businesswomen" so traditional marketing and outreach needs to be sensitive to the client base.
7	At least one-third of business support professional staff are women.	Support organisations need to make efforts to reflect the characteristics of their clients. Women business support professionals can be powerful role models to clients and women clients sometimes feel happier seeing another woman.
8	The service provider actively seeks to ensure that women can access the support services.	Take care responsibilities into account – women with care responsibilities will need access to a crèche or help with childcare costs without too many restrictions. Elder or dependents with other care needs is a growing issue where women are most likely to have primary responsibility. Culture is also an important consideration because women from some cultures will not attend mixed gender courses.
9	At least 40% of clients are women.	Within the Strategic Framework for Women's Enterprise, the government's target for women using government funded business support services is 40% and mainstream business support organisations need to meet this target.
10	When the service provider works in partnerships to deliver a coherent range of services, it has influence over partners and receives information on their operations.	Referral relationships are important, but best practice organisations will seek closer working relationships with organisations which enable them to deliver a coherent service. And they will expect the same high standards from partner organisations as they set for themselves.
11	The business service provider, directly or through partnerships, provides access to the following supports for women: – networking; – pre-enterprise training or counselling; – business training or counselling; – help accessing finance (i.e. grants and/or loans for business start-up and development, and/or informed signposting to appropriate sources of finance and business advice input to ensure women are investment-ready); – ICT training.	Women are often more open during women-only sessions, leading to broader discussions. Those sessions can be bonding opportunities which link women together into networks. These sessions build confidence and personal effectiveness skills such as time management and negotiation. They are essential foundations for people who are starting a business after a long period out of paid work. Women's businesses are disproportionately likely to be under-capitalised. Business support providers can help by providing direct access to loans and grants or advice which understands the situation of women entrepreneurs. Some reports find that women are less likely to use ICTs in their business. Business ICT should be a core element of business training programmes and clients should be encouraged to use ICTs to research and promote their business where appropriate. A lot of business is conducted through informal and formal networks – but women have traditionally been less likely to participate in business or other networks. Women-only networks can be a stepping stone to engage in a range of networks and in themselves provide opportunities for important mutual support with other women in the same position.
12	The service provider helps clients promote and celebrate their businesses where possible (e.g. encouraging them to apply for Awards; produce directories of members; seek press coverage of case studies).	Promotion has the dual benefit of promoting the business (and many women find sales and marketing a particular problem) and creating relevant role models for other women looking to start a business.

Project financing

The United Kingdom Government's Phoenix Development Fund and the European Union's EQUAL Community Initiative supported Prowess up until 2005 after which it had to become self-sufficient. Prowess currently generates approximately

EUR 450 000 per year with membership fees and special events contributing an additional EUR 150 000. Another small amount of income comes from consultancy.

Challenges encountered

The biggest challenge Prowess has faced was securing funding and a stable base of business development organisation clients in the face of changing government priorities related to enterprise support. Its initial key partners was the government's Small Business Service, but that was gradually dissolved from 2004 onward.

In 2005, the Business Link organisation (the national, publicly-funded business advice and guidance service) was transferred to the 9 English Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). Consequently, there was no longer a single body responsible for enterprise at the national level. Prowess, therefore decided to negotiate with each of the 9 RDAs for continuation funding to continue its work. 5 RDAs, including East Midlands Development Agency, which led the RDA movement on women and enterprise, continued work with Prowess.

The RDAs were abolished in 2010 with a change in government and although business support was made the responsibility of more than 30 Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) across England, these had limited resources to support specialist business development services for women. By 2010, the mainstream enterprise support system in England had become fragmented relative to the position in 2000 when a unified Small Business Service and a single brand covered the country. Prowess continues to work with these new structures and the New Anglia LEP has purchased membership of the new Charter for Women in Business and will audit its services using the Charter self-assessment tool as of 2014.

Prowess has also faced a series of financial challenges. In particular, the end of the Phoenix funding in 2006 led to an immediate reduction of its funding. Furthermore, specialist agencies, which were central to the Flagship Award programme and often were fee-paying members of Prowess, were often wound up as part of the simplification and consolidation of business support services. Prowess was also affected by the ending of support under the European Social Fund's (ESF) EQUAL Community Initiative and the difficulty of finding successor funding from the mainstream ESF programme. Prowess was also vulnerable to reduction in support from banks after the collapse of Lehmann brothers in 2007. Several banks such as RBS, NatWest and Lloyds TSB had funded Prowess out of corporate social responsibility budgets.

Impact

Prowess was evaluated as a case study as part of the in-depth evaluation of the Phoenix Development Fund published in 2005. The case study provided validation of the relevance of the Prowess approach through the Flagship Award.

The impact of Prowess in East Midlands is also illustrative of its achievements. The inclusion of Women's enterprise was highlighted in the Regional Development Strategy for the East Midlands. Women's enterprise was selected as one of the "Star Prizes" agreed by the board for special support (there were 10 of these in total). This also presented an opportunity to generate publicity and additional financial support.

Prowess was also able to make an impact at the national level. Following a sustained strategy to make its services more women-friendly, including the use of the Flagship Award, the national Business Link service increased its proportion of female clients from one-fifth to one-third, between 2003 and 2006 (Women's Enterprise Task Force, 2009).

Prowess worked closely with the Business Link network to help them achieve this strategy and several Business Link partners gained Flagship Award status.

Some legacy of their approach also lives on in the assessment criteria for SFEDI – the Small Firms Enterprise Development Initiative which are used to accredit business support initiatives. The criteria relate to how well the organisation can meet the needs of diverse clients from different backgrounds.

Conditions for transfer

Although the Prowess Flagship Awards for women-friendly business support received many plaudits during its decade of operation, it is noteworthy that there are no known equivalents in other parts of the EU. In principle there is nothing to stop the approach being adopted at national or regional level by ministries or organisations seeking to promote women's enterprise. However, accreditation schemes like this work best where there is strong pressure from national policy to improve provision for women-led businesses. This is essential if a market place in accreditation is to be viable. The following conditions for successful transfer are likely to apply:

1. *A strong ministerial drive to address low levels of women's enterprise.* This requires a research base and the recognition that lower start-up and survival rates for women-led businesses are a problem in the economy and society. It also requires that policy makers see that improving the quality of business support is necessary.
2. *Ensure a minimum duration to build credibility.* During their initial years of operation, organisations such as Prowess need public support to set up and to develop tools like the Flagship Award. Ideally this should be available for at least five years.
3. *There must be a demand.* For the award to succeed, there must be organisations that seek accreditation. The Flagship Award was best suited to a public sector financed approach to business support in which there are a range of mainstream business support organisations and specialist providers that support women entrepreneurs (start-up centres, incubators, business centres, business advice and coaching schemes, financial support). The subsequent charter has been developed to be more appropriate for a private sector model.
4. *Support organisations open to improvement.* For the award to work it has to be sold to business support organisations as a positive process in which they can improve. It requires business support organisations to be prepared to be assessed against objective criteria and of funders of business support to insist on support being provided in a women-friendly way.

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From:
Inclusive Business Creation
Good Practice Compendium

Access the complete publication at:
<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264251496-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD/European Union (2016), “Prowess, United Kingdom”, in *Inclusive Business Creation: Good Practice Compendium*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264251496-25-en>

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