



Women's Business Network



The Blue Book: A Network Co-ordinator's Guide has been made possible with the support of the European Social Fund community initiative, EQUAL, which tests and promotes new means of combating all forms of discrimination and inequalities in the labour market. EQUAL funds activities implemented by strategic partnerships known as Development Partnerships (DPs).

It is hoped that this guide will be a source of information and inspiration for anyone who wants to develop a new network to support and encourage women in business in different localities and in different business sectors across Europe.

Over two years, this guide has grown as a result of the valuable contributions of Network

Co-ordinators across Europe.

In October 2002, a group of Women's Business Network Co-ordinators from the North West of England met and worked with a group of Network Co-ordinators in Belgium. These women shared and compared their thoughts and experiences and together they developed the first draft of the Blue Book.

From these beginnings, we have reviewed and improved, the guide has itself been on a journey, gathering the thoughts and reflections of Women's Business Network Co-ordinators across Europe.

We hope that the following pages offer you ideas, guidance and inspiration.

We would like to thank all the Women's Business Network Co-ordinators from across Europe who contributed to this guide.



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PART ONE: **Why NETWORK?**





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Why Women's Business Networks?

For many centuries, women have come together, in various ways and for various reasons. What is distinctive about the networking we are witnessing today is the way in which it gives formal expression and visibility to previously informal and loosely organised relationships.

A lot of business comes through formal and informal networks, but women have commonly been less likely to participate. The structure and nature of traditional networks, which are frequently still male dominated, can often create a barrier to women.

Women can also find it difficult to get actively involved in networking activities, as the timing of events does not accommodate other commitments in their lives.

In women's business networks today, understanding and supporting one another play an important role and it is recognised that this creates solid foundations for relationships that help both personal development and business growth.

In combating feelings of isolation in business, women seek to build new relationships. Women often feel more able to open up and talk about broader issues affecting their business in a women-only session.

Some women can find real benefit and value in being a member of a women only network, here are just some of the reasons it's a good idea.....

- ✓ Women need to be encouraged to make time for themselves and to invest in both their personal and business development.
- ✓ Women often feel more comfortable and safer in a women only environment; it can be the only option for some cultural groups.
- ✓ Women's Business Networks can act as a stepping-stone, developing networking confidence and leading to the eventual introduction to traditional networks.
- ✓ Networks run by women for women are more likely to consider the demands of life's wider commitments.
- ✓ Group dynamics are key, women often provide a nurturing and educating environment.



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Successful networking

The art of networking, networking techniques, effective networking..... for some, it all appears to be a well kept secret.

The myth and mystery that sometimes surrounds networking means that for many women it becomes an issue, a fear, a skill gap that requires a training course.

Not everyone gets the opportunity to practice networking in a working environment. Nobody tells us that it is just a new buzz word for an age old habit, that of getting to know people and building relationships.

Women's Business Networks, offering a thoughtful, supportive environment can help eliminate the fears and uncover the mystery, but here are some useful hints to help you deal with that moment when you walk into a room full of strangers:

✓ Think about your non-verbal behaviour. Relax, take a deep breath, SMILE and give that message of openness!

✓ Warm up, make sure your voice is working – say a quick something to someone on the way in. If you feel nervous, just remember you are not the only one – go and introduce yourself to someone on their own, after all you will be helping them out!

✓ Develop some questions you feel comfortable with, show interest in others.

✓ Work out a snappy introduction: who you are and what your business does in a few short sentences.

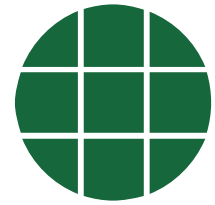
✓ Listen and Hear – Knowing you are being listened to is a real confidence booster.

✓ Have your business cards with you and ready to pass on to any new contacts you make.

✓ Practice..... the more you network, the easier it gets!



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Benefits of being a network member

Over 70% of new business is gained through word of mouth.

Networking should be an integral part of the marketing strategy of every company that is serious about doing business.

Being a member of a Women's Business Network can help you to:

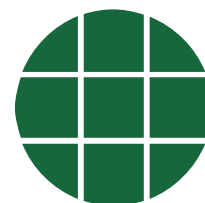
- ✓ share ideas, experience and good practice
- ✓ meet relevant role models
- ✓ combat isolation by making new contacts
- ✓ identify new business opportunities
- ✓ benefit from professional development and learning
- ✓ increase your self confidence and self esteem
- ✓ be stimulated to continue and/or grow your business
- ✓ practice your networking skills
- ✓ support others and be supported
- ✓ build long term relationships
- ✓ understand different perspectives

PART TWO:

ABOUT NETWORKS



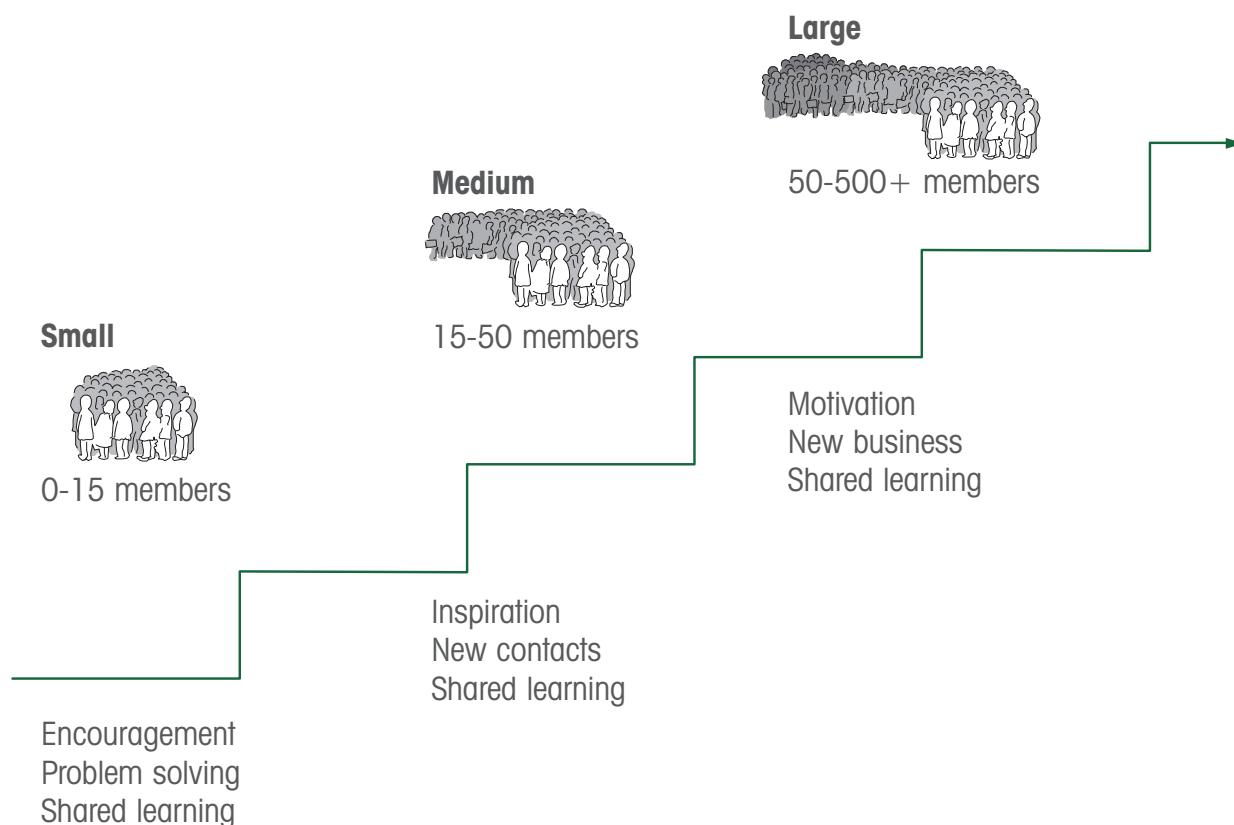
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The Network Spectrum

Networks come in all shapes and sizes

They all have their place in the world, answering the needs of women at different stages of personal and business development.



With a growing business and increasing confidence, a woman might well move from a small supportive network to a larger network where the focus on business-to-business opportunity becomes much stronger.



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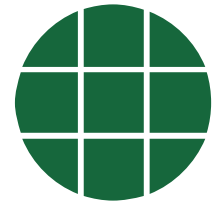


The differences

	Small, support network	Large, subscription based network
How the network starts	A dynamic entrepreneurial woman identifies like-minded contacts to be part of a network.	An individual or organisation decides to create a network and targets women to develop its membership.
Differences at the start	Development can be spontaneous, often in response to an identified need.	Development is planned, structure is defined in these early stages.
How is the network resourced	The network often operates with minimum cost thanks to the voluntary time of a co-ordinator.	There is an immediate cost implication; commonly the network is co-ordinated by a paid work force.
Governance	Although initially the structure may be informal, rules may be developed regularly.	The co-ordinator is often supported by a steering group, which can help to promote ownership and responsibility amongst members.
Differences in development	As the network grows, there may be a need for more structure and tasks may be shared between different members.	Paid co-ordination allows for significant investment in growing the network and expanding the activities.



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Key ingredients to your network

A network Champion:

Voluntary or paid, a dynamic, dedicated woman is key to building a strong, effective network

Potential members:

Women in business who are interested in making a commitment to themselves and the group

Common objectives:

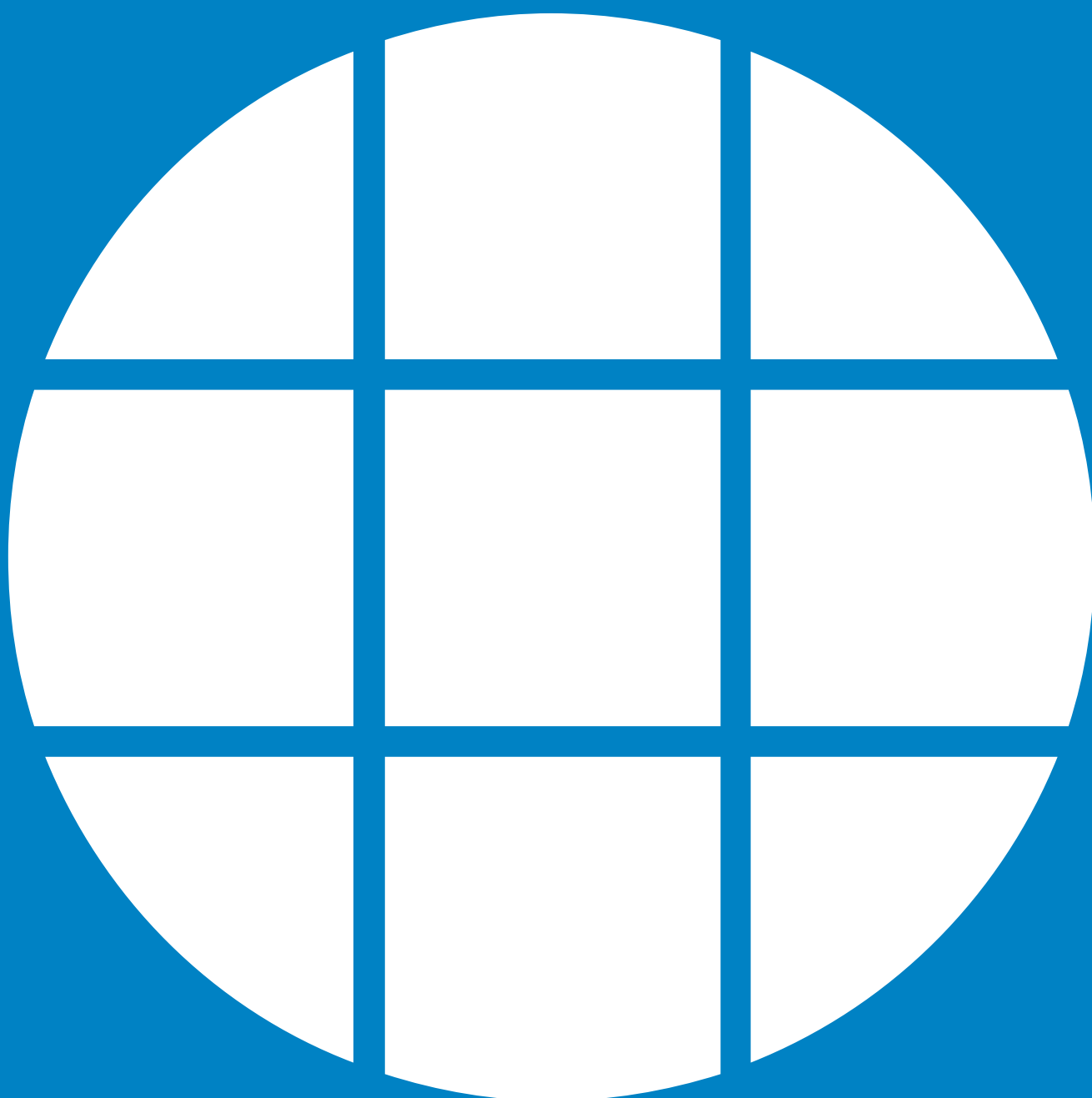
A shared focus will help to shape network activities to reach shared goals

Enthusiasm:

Expectations need to be realistic and lots of energy and enthusiasm are essential, building a network takes time and effort

PART THREE:

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE





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Defining your network

The most effective way to define your network is to listen to and act upon the views of your members. The strongest networks are member led, member driven.

Here are some of the things you might consider.....

How many members?

- ✓ The ideal number of members depends upon the purpose of the network.
- ✓ If the main objective of the network is sharing ideas and experience and supporting each other, a membership list of up to 30 is recommended.
- ✓ If networking for business is the main objective, a membership list of more than 50 women is a good target.
- ✓ Experience tells us to expect around 50% of our members to attend meetings.

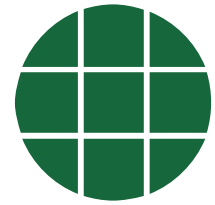
What is the link?

Geography

- ✓ A local network can work well; it is practical to have members who live close to each other.
- ✓ Geographical boundaries may be as small as estate level or as wide as a county or region.
- ✓ Sometimes different small networks can link together through a regional/national network in order to develop wider contacts and access more opportunities.
- ✓ For firms which operate nationally/internationally, a national/international network may offer more benefits.
- ✓ Teleconferences, internet chatting and exchanges via e-mail can provide and maintain relationships outside the region.



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Values

- ✓ Sharing the same values is key.
- ✓ The network should try to offer clear information to help new members understand its aims and objectives.
- ✓ The strength of a network can be achieved through attracting women who can benefit from and contribute to the network.

What sort of members?

- ✓ A strong business focus can be achieved by aiming for a membership made up of a majority of women owner/managers (e.g.66%).
- ✓ A higher proportion of women owner/managers enables peer support, business related learning and business opportunities.

Business connections

- ✓ The business sector that members operate in may provide the link.
- ✓ Common objectives: for example a shared challenge can provide the bond.
- ✓ Working collaboratively; pooling skills, experiences and resources, can provide the foundations for a network.

Special interest

- ✓ The experiences gained in black and minority ethnic networks demonstrate the impact of developing the right measures to support particular communities.
- ✓ Joining forces to find solutions to specific problems: for example a local issue or a change in law can be the catalyst for the development of a network.



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Resources for your Network

Making money

- ✓ Many larger networks collect an annual membership subscription, which contributes to day to day running costs.
- ✓ It is not unusual to charge one off event fees; these may be calculated to cover costs, or to incorporate a profit element.

Fees can act as a barrier, resulting in the exclusion of some women from the network.

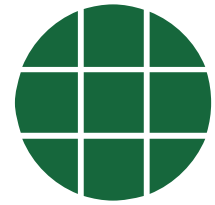
- ✓ Enterprising Network co-ordinators identify corporate sponsorship opportunities to support their network activities. Examples include: Banks, professional firms such as solicitors or accountants or firms looking to raise their profile with a potential market...women in business.
- ✓ Selling advertising space in your newsletter is a great way to generate revenue, if your network has the time and resources to produce a newsletter.

Using your initiative

- ✓ Volunteer co-ordinators often raise the profile of their own company through their activities supporting a network.
- ✓ Be Creative! Save on costs by inviting network members, friends or colleagues to be speakers.
- ✓ Meeting places may be pleased to waive room hire costs on a quiet night, particularly if you are paying for catering.
- ✓ Your local business support agency may be happy to provide a room for you to meet in at no cost.
- ✓ Small networks meet at members' premises, be they business or home!



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Planning your meetings

The easiest way to make decisions about your meetings is to ask your members. Remember though that it really is impossible to please all the people all the time.

How often?

- ✓ Weekly/Fortnightly/monthly/bi-monthly/quarterly.
- ✓ Too many meetings can be difficult for women in business to attend, due to demands on their time.
- ✓ Too few meetings will not build a sense of involvement and network binding.
- ✓ The most common frequency is one meeting a month.

What time of day?

- ✓ Breakfast/lunch/evening - Different times suit different women.
- ✓ Remember however that women still take responsibility for 70% of caring, school drop off and pick up times and school holidays are going to prevent a lot of women making it to your meetings.
- ✓ It is important to find out from the members of the network which day or which hour is suitable for them.

Where?

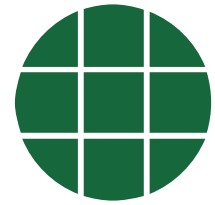
- ✓ Network meetings should be comfortable. The locations should be pleasant, so that women feel immediately at home.
- ✓ Venues must be easy to find and reachable by car and public transport.
- ✓ It is important to make sure that your venue has parking space in a safe, well-lit area.

How?

- ✓ Lack of finance can create limitations, but food can really help successful network meetings, creating a relaxed environment.
- ✓ Remember to ask if any of your members have special dietary requirements.
- ✓ Think about the layout of the room! Does it encourage networking?
- ✓ Is it warm enough? Is it cool enough? The temperature of the room can make a difference to whether members feel relaxed and comfortable.



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Meeting structure

- ✓ Meetings should always include time for networking, enabling the exchange of experiences between the members.
- ✓ As a general rule, it is good practice to bring a speaker in to at least half of your meetings. This helps to maintain focus and promote a learning environment.
- ✓ At meetings without a speaker, structure is still important; activities can be introduced such as sharing our business "highs" and "lows", members presenting their own companies.....

Meeting themes

- ✓ It is important to ask your members what themes or focus they want in the meetings.
- ✓ As well as personal and professional development activities, it is very important to get to know each other and this can be helped by:
 - Networking games.
 - Problem solving meetings.
 - Show casing member businesses (this can help to develop the presentation skills of members in a small and safe environment).
 - Activities to learn self-expression (role play/drama).
 - Enterprise visits to the businesses of network members give the owner/manager the chance to present themselves to the other members of the network and promote their own business.
 - Social events.
- ✓ Don't worry if the ideas run dry: revisiting topics is both educational for new members and refreshing for established members.



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Speakers

- ✓ The use of an external speaker is common where the focus is on educational activities, however a member of the network may be able to offer the appropriate skills.
- ✓ Be careful: The frequent use of speakers can become a danger, leaving no time for networking.
- ✓ Some external speakers charge, this may in itself create a barrier in terms of cost. A possible solution is to link up with one or two other networks and share the cost.
- ✓ Female speakers provide an important role model for the members of a network, which is extremely valuable.

Encouraging interaction

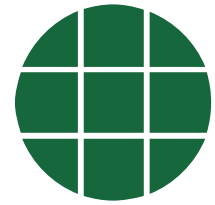
- ✓ It is important to get women talking to each other.
- ✓ Remember to consider people's culture, circumstances and confidence levels.
- ✓ Getting women to move out of their seat or away from their friends creates movement and encourages them to meet new people.
- ✓ An Energiser allows members of the network to get to know one another in a fun, easy manner.
- ✓ Take care: No one should feel intimidated or humiliated – sometimes people may feel out of their 'comfort zone' if asked to talk in public or move around the room.
- ✓ Energisers can be a real confidence boost if experienced in a supportive environment.

Other activities

- ✓ Organising a social event, participating in a national women's day or organising a Women's Business Award ceremony can stimulate the networking activity.
- ✓ Organising a group delegation to a conference or a larger network event is a great way to help your members develop their confidence together.



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Running your network

Communication

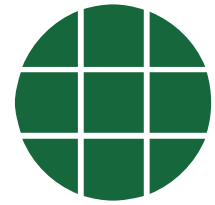
- ✓ Regular communication between the network and its members is vital to ensure that members do not feel isolated in between meetings.
- ✓ An e-mail address book is cost effective, efficient and very common – remember though...not everyone has access to e-mail.
- ✓ Data Protection Act (or equivalent) – take care to make sure members are happy for their information to be shared.
- ✓ Newsletters or e-zines are a great way to share news and promote your network and it is possible to cover the costs by selling advertising space.

Marketing

- ✓ Think carefully about your marketing! Many entrepreneurial women do not describe themselves as "business" women.
- ✓ If you distribute advertising flyers, put them in places women go.
- ✓ Provide your local business support agencies with information about your network.
- ✓ An events calendar helps members plan their diaries.
- ✓ The local press have an events list section – this is usually free and only takes a small amount of time to keep the editor informed.
- ✓ Real PR benefit can be gained by inviting the press along to some of your meetings when it is appropriate.
- ✓ "Good News" stories from members are a great way to get your network a press mention – winning new business; launching new products; success in business competitions – and you will gain publicity for one of your member businesses too.
- ✓ Identify "Supporters" of your network: Local women MPs; local colleges, who can offer advice to your members and promote the network to the wider community.
- ✓ Websites need resources, but have a search; you may be able to add information onto an existing site.



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Building your Network

- ✓ All networks need new members. Whether replacing members who leave or expanding the existing membership, attracting new women keeps the energy levels high.
- ✓ The most effective way to build your network is by word of mouth. If each of your members introduces one new member, you can double the size of your network by the next meeting.
- ✓ A membership registration form is useful, remember the Data Protection Act (or equivalent).
- ✓ Do new members feel comfortable in the group? - Existing network members can be asked to act as a "meeter and greeter" for new members.
- ✓ Remembering the names of the new members helps to make them feel welcome. It is a sure way to make them want to come back.
- ✓ As all event organisers know, commitments change: send a reminder a few days before a meeting (easy by e-mail).
- ✓ Link to regional or national umbrella organisations such as Women's Business Network (North West) Ltd.

Is it working?

- ✓ Gathering the opinions of your network members helps you plan content, times, design and venue.
- ✓ Both formal and informal evaluation methods can be used to gather open and honest feedback, try some of the following approaches: -
 - Written forms
 - Interactive group sessions
 - One to one discussions
 - e-mails
 - Questionnaires
 - Personal reflections
- ✓ Plan your meetings to allow sufficient time for evaluation.



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Questions & answers

Q Members are not attending the meetings, what can I do?

- A It is important to investigate what the real problem is to help you find a solution.
- A Phone and ask or send out a questionnaire
- A It may be time to revisit your aims and objectives; maybe you need to change the focus and structure of your meetings
- A Stay positive, sometimes the wind, the rain or even the sunshine can be an excuse

Q The Network Co-ordinator decides to retire, how do we keep the network going?

- A A network that depends on one individual will only last as long as that individual's commitment.
- A Strong networks often have a steering group, made up of a small group of members.
- A Sharing tasks between members gets more women involved.

Q My speaker has cancelled at the last minute and I'm expecting a great turn out, what can I do?

- A Always try to re-arrange – this was someone your members wanted to hear.
- A Use the meeting time well, use energisers or networking games to help your members get to know each other better.

Q I've run out of ideas for meetings, what else can I do?

- A Repeat something that went well. We all benefit from revisiting and reflecting on prior learning.
- A Give yourself a break! Ask some of your members to organise the next meeting, it is a good learning experience.



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About the Partners

Women Entrepreneurs in Europe is a collaboration between more than 100 organisations, participating in the following national Development partnerships:

Belgium	Diane Development Partnership
Germany	Women's Way of Entrepreneurship (WWoE)
Greece	Insular Confederacy - Equal Access Development Partnership
Italy	RA.S.P.U.T.IN. Development Partnership
Spain	Regenta Development Partnership: Equality Creates Employment
Sweden	Future Keys
The Netherlands	Stimulating Female Entrepreneurship in ICT
The Netherlands	From disadvantage to self-employment
UK	Accelerating Women's Enterprise (AWE)

In the UK, the **Accelerating Women's Enterprise (AWE)** Development Partnership is made up of 10 organisations, operating at the cutting edge of women's enterprise development spanning the English regions.

- Bolton Business Ventures
- Prince's Trust
- PROWESS (Promotion of Women's Enterprise Support)
- Street Cred, Quaker Social Action
- Rural Women's Network, Voluntary Action Cumbria
- Train 2000 Ltd
- WiRE (Women into Rural Enterprise)
- WEETU (Women's Employment, Enterprise and Training Unit)
- Women into the Network (University of Durham)
- Women's Business Network (NW)

www.awe-uk.co.uk



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Women's Business network (North West) Ltd

Women's Business Network (North West) Ltd, (WBN) is a social enterprise.

The aims of the organisation are to facilitate the creation and development of sustainable Women's Business Networks across the North West region and link these networks to provide an environment of peer support and business opportunities.

The activities undertaken by WBN encourage women to take the first steps to accessing formal business support structures. Many of the new, developing networks agree objectives that focus on peer group support and sharing knowledge. Building business strength through the development of skills and the increase in confidence is one of the key successes of our member networks.

The success of the regional network of networks established by WBN, demonstrates the need for alternative measures of business support to complement those services delivered by mainstream business support agencies.

WBN is quoted as a model of good practice, in the DTI's Strategic Framework for Women's Enterprise.

In November, 2003 WBN was awarded a Prowess Flagship award for Best Practice in Women's Enterprise Development. Prowess is the UK wide advocacy network, promoting Women's Enterprise Support Services.

If you would like to order copies of The Blue Book: A Network Co-ordinator's Guide, please contact;

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