

Strategy

WEConnect pairs corporations with women-owned firms



Kathryn Buck at her office in Montreal for The Globe and Mail

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Vancouver — From Wednesday's Globe and Mail Published on Wednesday, May. 19, 2010 8:24AM EDT Last updated on Wednesday, May. 19, 2010 9:03AM EDT

The numbers tell the story.

Fewer than 5 per cent of contracts let out by large companies and governments go to businesses owned by women, says Betty Wood of [WEConnect Canada](#), an Ottawa-based organization dedicated to improving that number.

At the same time, companies also understand that having a diverse roster of suppliers is key to being good corporate citizens; indeed, 97 per cent of Fortune 500 companies have initiatives and mandates to meet that goal, she notes.

“For women-run businesses, we exist to connect them to contract opportunities so they can grow their businesses ... For the corporations, they are keen to be a part of it and also fund it because they want access to innovative suppliers and they also want to reflect the marketplace that they are trying to do business with,” said Ms. Wood, WEConnect Canada’s head of certification and programs.

WEConnect, which launched its B.C. chapter on Monday, brings the two sides together through an official accreditation program for female-owned companies. The independent, not-for-profit organization began operating in Canada in March, 2009; it is modelled on a U.S. parent, now in its 13th year.

To become a WEConnect member, a company must be at least 51-per-cent owned by women. Once certified, member firms get the chance to supply goods and services to some of the world's biggest companies and to bid on U.S. and Canadian government contracts. There are 67 certified companies in Canada and another 24 are currently going through the application process, Ms. Wood said.

"There is quite a variety of companies in terms of size, and certainly smaller and medium-sized companies take part," Ms. Wood said. "All members need at least \$100,000 in sales, though some members in the U.S. can go up to a billion in sales."

Small businesses that join WEConnect Canada can form strategic alliances when bidding for projects, and the organization provides supportive help, Ms. Wood said.

Members can bid for jobs via WEConnect's website, though many go straight to the corporate supplier diversity websites offered by many big companies.

When bidding for work or sales, the accredited companies can tick off boxes saying that they hold WEConnect accreditation as female-owned, managed and controlled, which Ms. Wood says can give them an advantage.

Big companies that are committed to diversity programs such as WEConnect include Wal-Mart, Accenture, Royal Bank of Canada, IBM, Ernst & Young, and Staples. Procurement arms of governments in Canada and the United States are also making use of the system.

Vanessa Noga, vice-president of commercial and financial services at RBC, said the bank has been a sponsor of WEConnect Canada from its start. Vendors that want to offer their goods or services to RBC can register online for business opportunities and also declare their membership in WEConnect, she said.

"Of course, as a business we are eager to maintain price point and quality, and it is about [doing business with] the best companies with the best products. But diversity for growth and innovation is one of our core values," Ms. Noga said.

Businesses certified with WEConnect Canada are involved in a wide range of sectors, from manufacturers of fittings, furniture and name badges, to services such as communications and marketing, and IT.

Kathryn Buck, executive vice-president of bMod Communications, a Montreal-based company that specializes in marketing and communications for pharmaceutical firms, joined WEConnect Canada in March, 2009.

At first, she wasn't sure she wanted to join. "Time is absolutely precious, and I thought that while it sounded appealing I didn't have another minute to give (to sort out the application process). If I have a minute to give I'd rather give it to my kids right now," the mother of three said.

“But what became important for me was that I had one key client, Pfizer, which was very much involved globally, and it was a benefit to join, so I did.”

She said it was worth the effort.

“It’s turned out to be very beneficial. A lot of good stuff is happening in the States through WEConnect because diversity is legally binding there. In Canada there is less momentum right now because there is nothing legally binding corporations to get involved,” Ms. Buck said.

The concept of hiring companies on the basis of their diversity started off in the United States, when the federal government brought it in as a legal target requirement. Many larger, international corporations have followed suit with voluntary targets in other countries. There is no official push by the Canadian government, though Ms. Wood said most of the bigger companies with these targets that are doing business here are American.

“Because [key client] Pfizer is a global corporation, they are involved here in Canada as well, and the procurement people said it would be a great idea for us to get involved with WEConnect and be registered. It cemented our relationship with them,” she added.

Ms. Buck said WEConnect accreditation has brought in new business, but it is too early to say how much it has helped the bottom line.

“The key benefit for us is that it has opened doors so that people who, traditionally, may not have been willing to meet with us said ‘ok, let’s meet.’ It gives us an added dimension in their eyes,” she said. “Even though in Canadian pharmaceutical companies do not have this legal requirement, our clients are generally American and they are very much in tune with having a diversity policy and so it has become a Canadian policy.”

Marla Kott, CEO of Vancouver-based Imprint Plus, which makes reusable name badges, was also an early applicant with WEConnect Canada. She recalled how in the past she would meet with customers in the United States, where most of her sales were made, and would be asked if Imprint Plus were a female-owned, accredited company.

Because her company is part of WEConnect, Imprint Plus is now supplying products to MGM casinos in the United States and abroad, and for the first time it has secured a supply contract for the U.S. government worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.

“For some people [getting such contracts] can take up to eight years, but for us it took just eight months,” she said.

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