

A photograph of two women, Susy and Cathy Imbriglio, standing in a factory or industrial setting. They are both smiling and wearing black professional attire. The woman on the left is wearing a black blazer with flared sleeves and black pants. The woman on the right is wearing a black sweater with a white collar and black pants. In the background, there is industrial machinery with blue and grey components.

Breaking the mold

How to find your place
in an industry dominated
by men

Susy and Cathy Imbriglio
Imbritech

bdc 

The bank of expanding your horizons

Laura Didyk
Vice President, Alberta South, BDC



Helping women entrepreneurs build and grow their businesses

In 2015, BDC unveiled an initiative to better support women entrepreneurs.

We committed to increasing our lending to majority women-owned businesses to at least \$700 million over three years, and we expanded our sponsorship of programs and events focused on women entrepreneurs.

I'm pleased to report that we reached our lending goal almost a year in advance. And the number of women majority-owned companies in our portfolio has gone up 41% since the start of the initiative.

Continuing to progress

We were not surprised to see how quickly women entrepreneurs reacted to our increased support. After all, we have long known that they are every bit as talented and ambitious as men.

So why do women-owned businesses lag behind male-owned companies on a number of performance measures?

Part of the answer is the type of businesses women tend to operate—specialized service companies. Women entrepreneurs are underrepresented in high-growth technology sectors, for example, where only 5% of companies have a female CEO.

Supporting women entrepreneurs in every industry

Looking forward, we want to continue our support for women entrepreneurs and help build an ecosystem that allows them to thrive across every sector of the economy.

In November 2016, we announced a \$50 million envelope for women founders in technology companies at pre-seed and seed stage. We are pleased to announce that we've increased this envelope to \$70 million, and included direct and indirect investments. We are also collaborating with Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters (CME) to advance their Women in Manufacturing initiative.

I am convinced these efforts, along with those of our many partners across the country, will help women entrepreneurs achieve their full potential. And when that happens, it's Canada as a whole that will benefit.

How a Newfoundland entrepreneur grew her business from 50 to 750 employees in 15 years

Anne Whelan shares her secrets to business success and speaks about her journey as a single mother managing the growth of her company into a successful Newfoundland powerhouse.

Anne Whelan's success as an entrepreneur is nothing short of astonishing. In 15 years, she quickly expanded and diversified the Newfoundland-based home-care business she took over from her mother in 2002, growing from 50 employees to 750.

Her St. John's-based holding company, Seafair Capital, is now comprised of 10 businesses, and its annual revenues have ranged from \$30 million to \$50 million in recent years. Her businesses include the original home-care business, CareGivers, along with a fire-safety company, a skin-care clinic and a restaurant.

Whelan also chairs the board of Newfoundland Power, sits on BDC's Board of Directors and was named one of Canada's 100 most powerful women by the Women's Executive Network of Canada in 2016.

A veteran entrepreneur with 15 years of experience, Whelan shares these six lessons for success.

Always think about what's next

Whelan's secret to her rapid business growth: always looking ahead to the next opportunity. "I'm always thinking about what's next," she says.

"Those who know me say I'm always moving. I always try to find ways to say 'yes' when I see a demand, including when the service is difficult to provide. Once a project is going, I'm already on to the next project. My job as a business leader is to find the next project."

Empower your team to do what you're not good at

Whelan's approach succeeds largely because she also relies on a second, equally important strategy: trusting and investing in her team. "I don't wash my hands of a project once it's up and running," she says.

"I make sure I get really talented people to execute it. It's more than delegating. It's realizing your strengths and weaknesses and empowering others to do what you're not good at. You have to invest to get the right people. This has been instrumental to our growth."

Step outside your business to see what others do

In 2013, Whelan's business suffered a pair of blows. Just as the Newfoundland economy was taking a tumble, the provincial government cut back on home-care contracts for Whelan's CareGivers business. The impact on her bottom line was severe.

Luckily, Whelan had already realized that her business was overly reliant on government contracts and had started to diversify. That shift helped her weather the hard times and eventually return to growth.

The experience taught Whelan the importance of stepping outside her business to work on the company's longer-term vision and strategy. "I was so busy running the business that I never looked around to see what others were doing," she says. "I found myself just steering the ship without thinking about the journey we were on."

Build a network of advisors

Around this time, Whelan also started to expand her circle of business contacts, attending business workshops and professional development opportunities for women entrepreneurs and developing a network that she could approach for advice.



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Anne Whelan

President and CEO, Seafair Capital Inc. St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador

“I wish I had done a better job of building a network of advisors earlier on,” she says. “Getting more outside advice earlier would have allowed me to scale faster and with less pain. I learned this way too late.”

Show up. Shake hands. It really helps.

“When people ask ‘What’s your one piece of advice,’ I say, ‘Show up.’ Go to business association meetings, the chamber of commerce. Shake hands. It can be awkward at first. But even if you have a very small business, it’s extremely helpful,” says Whelan.

It’s advice she believes can resonate especially well with women entrepreneurs. “Women tend to be good entrepreneurs because they have a collaborative way of working. Having those relationship skills is very valuable.”

Own your path. Be the change.

Whelan says women are still underrepresented in leadership positions and face biases in the business world. “Women who are decisive and hard-nosed have different words applied to them than men,” she says. “We don’t say men are bossy. We say they are strong and powerful, while women are said to be ambitious.”

She advises women in business to be unafraid of being ambitious. “It’s important that you own your path. Be the change,” she says. “Getting a seat at the senior levels will help remove those structural biases. The more women embrace the role of CEO and business owner, the more that is going to help Canada be a nation of entrepreneurs.”



Blood and steel

Two sisters successfully take over the family machining business

Susy and Cathy Imbriglio run a machining workshop. For them, it was natural to follow in their father's footsteps; he had introduced them to entrepreneurship and industrial manufacturing at a very young age.

Every day, Cathy Imbriglio puts on her blue smock coat and safety boots before entering the machining workshop in which parts built by Imbritech Industries are cut, manufactured and adjusted.

Although it's rare to see women in industrial settings, this is a rather familiar environment for her and her sister Susy. They grew up in the factory founded by their father, Benny. They often went there with him before working in the business during the summer when they were students. "The smell of the steel is in our blood!" says Susy Imbriglio.

It was only natural for the sisters to follow in their father's footsteps. Today, they run the Laval-based business, which specializes in CNC machining, as well as welding and cutting.

Imbritech serves several industries, including pulp and paper, hydroelectricity, heavy tracked vehicles and aeronautics.

As business leaders, it is not always easy to find one's place in an industry dominated by men. "We have to work harder to build our credibility," acknowledges Susy. "But it's okay, because we come from strong stock!"

According to Susy, her sister Cathy, who is in charge of production, has experienced more sexism than she has. "Since she works more with the machines, she has not always been taken seriously," says Susy. "There are people who asked if they could see her boss! She is a trained mechanical engineer so she knows what she is talking about."

Contrary to what one might think, being women is almost a benefit for the Imbriglio sisters when it's time to meet with investors. "We have an easier time getting their attention," notes Susy. People are interested in our story and are happy to do business with a company that's women-led."

A successful transition

Imbritech was founded by Benny and his co-partners, wife Teresa and daughter Susy, in 2009. Benny had already owned two other manufacturing businesses that he got rid of to start this new adventure. From the outset, Susy took over general management of Imbritech, supported by her mother. Cathy joined the family business in 2012, after working at Pratt & Whitney for a few years.

In 2014, Benny, then 68 years old, felt that he was ready to pass the torch on to his daughters. The succession process was completed a year later. "It was quite simple. We were already working at the company, so we were familiar with its inner workings. It was mostly a matter of transferring the ownership," explains Susy Imbriglio.

Recruitment and retention challenges

The year following the business transfer was no walk in the park for the Imbriglio sisters. "One of our employees was injured and he was the only one who could operate one of our machines. Being a small team, our turnaround time became longer, which prevented us from producing as much as usual."

Although the situation is now back to normal, it illustrates the difficulty manufacturers experience when it comes to finding the specialized workforce they need. Imbritech is no exception. "Finding qualified machinists can be an extremely tough challenge," says Susy Imbriglio. "We also have to know how to keep them with the company."

The business is working hard to retain its staff. "We are doing a lot to show our appreciation," says Susy. "We do something for every anniversary, and we sometimes offer lunch for the entire team, among other things. This is important because our employees are our best representatives. They are the ones who make the company."

The Imbriglios' (father and daughters) recipe is paying off because some employees have more than 25 years of seniority. "They followed my father around his various businesses. We've known them since we were young."

Is it difficult to become the boss of workers who you've known since you were young? "My father taught us to never think we were better than anybody else. We treat everybody as equals and the respect is mutual."

Maintaining a work-family balance

Although the Imbriglio sisters are seeking to grow Imbritech, they do not plan to expand at any price. "Since 2009, we have gone from 9 to 14 employees.

“Running a business as a woman is not the same thing. I have to make choices that my father did not have to. My mother was at home and took care of everything.”

Our objective is to have 20 within a few years. We want to remain a flexible business that focuses on the quality of the work.”

There is also the fact that their reality is different from their father's, who's had more than 40 employees working under him. "This is not what we want. Running a business as a woman is not the same thing. I have to make choices that my father did not have to. My mother was at home and took care of everything. She began to work at the company when Cathy, who is my younger sister, started school," explains Susy Imbriglio, who is the mother of a three-year-old boy.

"Imbritech is my other baby," she adds. "Juggling work and home life requires a dynamic balance. It has to be constantly adjusted."

3 tips to establish yourself in an industry dominated by men



1. Know your business inside out

It's an unfortunate reality, but women often "have to work harder to build [...] credibility," in the words of Susy Imbriglio. But as she and her sister point out, when you know your business and your industry inside out, being a woman in a male-dominated sector can sometimes help make you stand out with customers and investors.

2. Take care of your employees

The growth of Canada's working age population will be almost zero by 2020. This means that recruiting and retaining qualified employees is going to become more difficult. Retaining your staff with small perks and additional flexibility can go a long way to ensuring you can compete in the years to come.

3. Maintain a work-life balance

As an entrepreneur, it's important that you know your limits. Not only do your employees depend on you, but so does your family. This can be even harder for women entrepreneurs who often have a different reality than their male counterparts at home. "Juggling work and home life requires a dynamic balance," says Cathy Imbriglio. "It has to be constantly adjusted."



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