



## Prowess, United Kingdom

### What?

Prowess is a membership network of organisations that deliver women-friendly business start-up support across the United Kingdom (UK). 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. The Prowess company was closed in 2012 due to government budget cuts but the former CEO re-launched Prowess as a social enterprise. It has since re-invented itself with a stronger focus on support from private sector actors.

### Why?

Women entrepreneurs in the UK were responsible for approximately one-third of business start-ups in the early 2000s. They were clearly under-represented among new business owners. It was recognised that business support services were not reaching enough women and often failed to recognise their economic potential and encourage them to pursue self-employment. Prowess was launched during a period when the government was pursuing a policy of developing specialist enterprise agencies for under-represented groups.

### Key activities

At its peak, Prowess had over 350 member organisations, which between them supported over 100 000 women business owners. The network 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. It also produced a range of training materials, best practice reports and quality standards for business support services aimed at women entrepreneurs. Prowess has engaged in a wide range of activities at national and regional levels, including lobbying, advocacy and provision of support services, such as annual events, to its member organisations. One of its greatest contributions was the Prowess Flagship Award designed to recognise women-friendly business support services. This was part of a project financed by the Phoenix Development Fund which sought to support enterprise development in disadvantaged areas and among groups under-represented in enterprise.

Since 2011, the Flagship Award has ceased under Prowess and 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 but

also goes further by providing a code of practice for staff and training in addition to its optional accredited level.

## Impact

Prowess was evaluated as a case study under the Phoenix Development Fund. The network, and particularly its Flagship Award, has made an impact at both regional and national level. For example, following a sustained strategy to make its services more women-friendly, the national Business Link service increased its proportion of female clients from one-fifth to one-third between 2003 and 2006. Prowess worked closely with the Business Link network to help them achieve this strategy.

*This case study was adapted from material published in: OECD/EU (2016), Inclusive Business Creation: Good Practice Compendium, OECD Publishing, Paris. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264251496-en> [1]*

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### Links

[1] <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264251496-en>