

# Women's Networks: Good for Women, Good for Business

By

Carol Frohlinger

The “business case” argument for retaining women and promoting them into leadership roles has been heard<sup>1</sup>; no longer is there a question about *whether* to support women, the question now is *how to do it*.

Among the things the women we interviewed for our book, *Her Place at the Table: A Woman's Guide to Negotiating Five Key Challenges to Leadership Success*, told us was that they didn't do it alone – they relied on support from others. When people are able to talk openly about issues that concern them, problem-solve ways to manage them, and then see how their efforts have a positive impact on their organization, it follows that their job satisfaction increases and their loyalty deepens.



For many reasons, women (and other traditionally disadvantaged groups) have had a hard time breaking into the traditional, informal networks that tend to form on the golf course and crystallize into solid business relationships over time. Women's Networks<sup>2</sup> offer a substitute. When they work well, these networks can function as a way to get the sharing going in a way that's good for women and good for business.

So what steps can organizations take to ensure these Networks start and stay strong?

**1. Provide open and notorious support.**

If yours is a culture that hasn't supported women much in the past, clear the air by explaining why a Women's Network makes sense for the organization and how it will benefit everyone. Women who may not have been sure that joining a network was a good idea will be encouraged not only to join but to actively participate. They will be engaged since they stand to gain both professionally and personally. And naysayers, whether they male and female, will not say “nay” as loudly.

**2. Step up with funding.**

Network leaders have day jobs and can't be expected to offer programming and tools to members without proper resource allocation. No budget, no results.

**3. Pay attention.**

Networks certainly help individuals to be more successful in their careers but they also can uncover organizational characteristics that affect women as a

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<sup>1</sup> Among much research describing the positive correlation between women in senior management roles and superior financial performance, see [The Bottom Line: Connecting Corporate Performance and Gender Diversity](#), Catalyst, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Also known as Affinity Groups or Resource Groups.

constituency. When networks “bubble-up” issues, they’re important — organizations that listen carefully and take them seriously can fix problems they didn’t even know they had. Often, the Network itself will have some workable solutions in mind.

## The Deloitte Story

If you want to learn more (or convince others at your company) about just how a Women’s Network can boost the bottom line, consider the story of the [Women’s Initiative \(WIN\) at Deloitte LLP](#).

Begun in 1992, when then Chairman and CEO, Mike Cook, took on the challenge of identifying the reasons talented women were leaving the firm<sup>3</sup>, it has not only produced the desired results critical to talent management but led to many other business “home-runs” as well. As reported in the [WIN 2007 Annual Report](#), these include:

- Retaining women at the same rate as men
- Promoting women into leadership roles — the percentage of women partners, principals and directors has increased from 12% in 1999 to 21% in 2007
- Preparing its partners to sell more effectively to women clients as more women move into decision-making roles.
- Leveraging the idea of Mass Career Customization™, the Deloitte solution to alternative career paths (first identified by WIN) into a business capability and kicking off the first client engagement.

Deloitte is the poster child of the benefits that can be realized from a Women’s Network that is supported from the top of the house, given the resources required to succeed and seen as an investment rather than an expense. Smart organizations will follow Deloitte’s lead.

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### About the Author:

**Carol Frohlinger** is a co-founder of [Negotiating Women, Inc.](#), a company that provides negotiation and leadership training and coaching for women and consulting services for their organizations. A co-author of ***Her Place at the Table: A Woman’s Guide to Negotiating Five Key Challenges to Leadership Success***, Carol is an expert on how negotiation skills can help women to advance in business. She holds a J.D. from Fordham University School of Law.

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<sup>3</sup> Douglas M. McCracken’s 2006 article describing the business case precipitating Deloitte’s efforts to retain and promote women is available at [Harvard Business Review](#).