

The Organization of Women in International Trade (OWIT)--How Local Chapters Play a Role in Economic Development

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By Evelyn M. Suarez

Women's History Month seems a particularly appropriate time to highlight the Organization of Women in International Trade (OWIT) and how its chapters around the United States promote education on international commerce. Frequently, chapters work with state or local economic development agencies or World Trade Centers to spread the word about the economic benefits of international trade.

So what is OWIT and how did it get its start? In the 1980s, women in several locations formed local groups with similar goals to advance the careers and opportunities for women involved in international trade. The first one was in Chicago in 1985, followed by Los Angeles and Orange County later that year, Washington, D.C., and New York in 1986, Boston in 1987, and Northern California, Detroit and Texas in 1989. Most of these chapters were founded independently and without knowledge of each other.

By 1990, OWIT held its first national conference in Washington, D.C., with 12 chapters in Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York, Northern California, Orange County, San Diego, Seattle, Texas and Washington, D.C. Today, OWIT has expanded overseas and its domestic chapters provide a network and educational opportunities for those interested in advancing women's careers in international commerce and business.

OWIT chapters form partnerships with state and local economic development entities, whether governmental or quasi-governmental. This is a natural alliance facilitating the dissemination of information to the public on the importance of international commerce in their daily lives.

OWIT chapters are active around the country. The L.A. Chapter – [WIT-LA](#) – regularly partners with the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce, the Ports of L.A. and Long Beach, the Mayor's Office for the City of L.A., the District Export Council (DEC), foreign consulates and other trade organizations including the Los Angeles Customs Brokers and Freight Forwarders Association and the Foreign Trade Association. WIT-LA is currently working with the DEC, the Port of L.A., L.A. World Airports and the Consulate General of Israel to organize an event to celebrate the 30-year anniversary of the U.S.-Israel Free Trade Agreement (FTA). They also routinely partner with the U.S. Commercial Service on various events, most recently on the *Discover Global Markets Europe* Conference in 2014.

Central Virginia OWIT – [OWIT-CVA](#) – works regularly with the Virginia Economic Development Partnership (VEDP) to raise awareness about international trade and to publicize opportunities the state provides to help Virginia companies do business internationally. At the local level, OWIT-CVA partners

with the Greater Richmond Partnership to help international businesses seeking to locate in the Richmond area or do business with Richmond-based companies. Both VEDP and Greater Richmond Partnership are represented on the OWIT-CVA Board and have facilitated training and educational events through OWIT.

In 2014, the NE Ohio OWIT Chapter ([WIT-NEO Profile](#)) worked with the local Chamber of Commerce and the City of Mentor to put on a small business symposium on international trade. This OWIT Chapter collaborated with the Chamber of Commerce and City to offer educational programs on the basics of exporting and other logistics matters geared to smaller, less experienced exporters.

While the Washington, D.C. Chapter, Women in International Trade (WIIT), is focused more on federal trade issues, it is extremely active and has started a Charitable Trust dedicated to trade-related educational activities. On February 27, the [Charitable Trust](#) held an event on Capitol Hill to foster understanding on Trade Promotion Authority (TPA).

OWIT Utah has the tagline “United around the globe to foster international trade and the advancement of women in business.” The organization is sponsoring a [Utah Women in Global Business and Trade Conference](#) with World Trade Center Utah and the Women’s Business Center on March 6, 2015, called “The Face of International Business” because:

The face of international business is changing. According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Center for Women in Business, “As successful solo enterprises led by women grow into employer firms, understanding their character and impact will contribute to creating environments that help more women scale up their businesses and ultimately serve national and international markets in unique and groundbreaking ways.”

Women are starting businesses faster than any other group in the U.S. and Utah ranks in the top ten states. As women rise to lead economic development here in Utah they are doing so differently than men. Women may toggle between home life with children and savvy business in a board room. Many women do not know where to find resources and lack a close-knit social group to provide connections.

OWIT Utah, working closely with World Trade Center Utah and the Salt Lake Chamber Women’s Business Center seek to help bridge these gaps. OWIT-Arkansas also works closely with its World Trade Center.

OWIT –Greater Triangle in North Carolina launched its chapter in December 2013 with a keynote from N.C. Secretary of Commerce Sharon Decker. OWIT-South Florida and the Port of Miami offered an exclusive and behind-the-scenes-visit and presentation by the U.S. Customs & Border Protection Anti-Terrorism Contraband Enforcement Team. The Charleston OWIT Chapter regularly collaborates with the S.C. Port Authority.

This is just a sampling of what the various Organization of Women in International Trade chapters are doing across the country. OWIT chapters, in collaboration with local and state agencies as well as World Trade Centers, around our nation are empowering and equipping women to do business internationally through education and access to global business contacts. As IMF Managing Director Christine Lagarde

[observed in Tokyo](#) on September 12, 2014, the global economy will benefit from “unleashing the economic power of women. Bringing the world’s largest excluded group into the fold.”

OWIT and the states are doing their part to realize Lagarde’s vision in the U.S.

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