



# AT THE TOP OF THEIR GAME

By Gail Chiasson

REACHING TO CRACK THE GLASS CEILING ISN'T A PROBLEM FOR MEMBERS OF THE WOMEN PRESIDENTS' ORGANIZATION: THEY'RE ALL PRESIDENTS AND/OR CEOs OF THEIR OWN COMPANIES.

AND THERE ARE A LOT MORE OF THEM THAN YOU MIGHT THINK. THERE ARE MORE THAN 1,300 MEMBERS OF THIS EXCLUSIVE GROUP IN CANADA AND THE U.S. IN TOTAL, INCLUDING ENOUGH OF THEM TO COMPRISE FOUR CHAPTERS IN CANADA: TWO IN TORONTO AND ONE EACH IN MONTREAL AND VANCOUVER.

Who are these women? Mainly entrepreneurs, whose Canadian companies average revenue is \$10.4 million (\$13 million average in the U.S.) — with an aggregate revenue of \$887 million annually. And among them, the Canadian companies employ more than 8,000 men and women in total.

To belong to the Women Presidents' Organization, a company must have \$2 million in gross annual sales or \$1 million for a service-based business. (In fact, 3% of women-owned businesses gross over \$1 million a year and many would qualify for WPO membership.) There are a total of 81 WPO chapters in Canada, the U.S., the U.K. and Peru. Some of these women are in what is known as Platinum groups: women whose companies gross over \$10 million annually. In this group, average revenues are \$25 million.

Each chapter averages 20 members who meet once a month to address business concerns. They find support, empowerment, inspiration and, incredibly important, the ability to tap into the wisdom of their peers.

WPO was founded 10 years ago by Marsha Firestone, president, a PhD who had earlier been vice-president of Women Inc. and vice-president of training and counseling at the American Women's Economic Development Corporation (both U.S.). In 2003, she was appointed to the National Women's Business Council. The author of *The Busy Woman's Guide to Successful Self-Employment* as well as research articles in business and educational journals. Dr. Firestone is an expert in adult learning theory, nonverbal communications, and managerial competency.

She realized that it can be lonely at the top for many women who want to learn to grow their business to the next level—and she knew that women tend to help one another. So in 1997, she founded the organization to help women address such subjects as financial concerns, organizational development, and hiring and firing.

Leslie Meingast, president and CEO of The Personnel Department and the Galt Group of Companies, Vancouver, was reluctant to join the WPO when initially invited to join the Vancouver chapter.

"I already belonged to another women's group, but I was convinced to take a chance and come see what it was about," says Meingast. "I had new business within 15 minutes into the meeting. Women do help women. It's terrific. I was and am astounded by the energy and collaboration of the group. If someone needs something, everybody is open and receptive. It can be a little social, but that's fine. It provides balance."

The Personnel Department, founded in 1980, is a global Human Resources solutions corporation that excels at temporary staffing, staff recruiting, executive search, contract staffing, project staffing, and human resource consulting. It has ranked seven years consecutively within the Best Companies to Work For in B.C.; is ranked one of the 50 best workplaces in Canada; since 2001, has won the Consumers' Choice Awards in Alberta and B.C.; and in the U.S., where it has offices in Portland and Salem in Oregon and in Oklahoma City, Oregon Business has ranked it for the past six years in the 100 Best Companies to Work For (# 10 in 2008).

Meingast is also associated with the Galt Foundation, a registered not-for-profit organization in the U.S. dedicated to providing employment opportunities to persons with disabilities and vocational barriers and providing temporary staffing. She funded the Galt Foundation in 1999 as The Personnel Department's millennial community project. The Foundation is expected to do about \$14 million in business this year.

The Foundation has now also been registered in Canada where it will likely be operational in about six months.

And with an acquisition in the making in Toronto, The Personnel Department is growing on both the national and international front, offering 17 different services. Galt Western Personnel Ltd is the parent of The Personnel Department and all the Canadian operations. Galt USA Ltd. is the parent of the US operations.

Meingast didn't start out to head a multinational company, despite her father's telling his four young daughters (and brother) in the 1950s, "You can do anything that a man could do and could do it better."

"I come from a matriarchal family," says Meingast. "My grandmother was a big influence. She was the centre of the family and balanced the cheque book."

The young Meingast started her career in banking, moved into accounting, then office management, and eventually decided to go to law school and "see what the rest of the world offered." But a stop



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Gupta was born in London, but moved to Canada in 1968. She was schooled in Montreal, and then, at age 18 and with no experience, ran a small retail clothing chain while taking university courses at night. She then took time off to stay at home raising her two children.

“At that time, my dad started sourcing lighting products from a company in India owned by the family,” she says. Gupta launched Greenlite in 1996, quickly moving to energy-efficient products when research pointed to the ‘green’ movement — and capturing a solid market share before major lighting competitors clicked into the green future.

“Our success is because we have been single-minded,” she says. “If we hadn’t been financially strong, we might have had to deviate. We’ll use the same sources in India for our solar panel division, using the same formula, and we’ll have basically the same customers.”

Gupta makes it a point to hire women just out of school or women wanting to move back into the work force, even if they are lacking certain skills.

“Attitude and aptitude are what is important,” is a message she can give her WPO colleagues. “If you have aptitude and attitude, I can teach you anything. We make it a point to be flexible, allowing people to move to different departments as we and they discover their interests and talents. And we give them opportunities to move up. There’s no reason why people who come into the company in sales or design can’t become the manager of purchasing, for example, if we see that they have attitude and aptitude.”

Gupta was honoured with the Trailblazing Award at this year’s Canadian Women Entrepreneur Awards.

Jill Anderson, president of Aecometric Corporation, Toronto, also heads a company obsessed with the world’s need to be green and to cut emissions. She jumped into her company’s position as president following her husband’s sudden serious illness.

“My husband had started the company in 1972, and I stayed home with my first two children,” says Anderson “I joined the business in the finance area when they were older, and then stayed home again after my third child was born, until 1990. In early 1996, my husband had a stroke and I had to make the decision whether to sell the company or keep it running. Very much the entrepreneur, he was the company — both management and sales — so many of the long-term employees left. I decided to keep the company going. My driver was fear. We were just coming out of a recession with little money, so my employees consisted of new students and new immigrants.”

Today, Aecometric Corporation designs and supplies heavy industrial combustion equipment for base industries such as cement, pulp and paper, steel, petrochemical, mineral processing and ethanol. One of the company’s core areas of expertise is the reduction of emissions through the use of Aecometric’s High Intensity Burners.



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– Nina Gupta

customer demand.”

Anderson studied fine arts and, like Gupta, took university courses at night. As a stress reliever, she paints when she has time.

“I joined the WPO in Toronto about four years ago when I decided I needed some conversation with people who had like problems,” says Anderson. “It has helped to see that there are other women that face similar work related issues on a day-to-day basis.”

And as Meingast says, “The WPO is the only place I can go as a business person and get it on all levels.”



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– Jill Anderson

Aeco equipment has also been proven to use almost 40% less fuel than the competition. This allows the industrial processes in plants to reduce smog causing NOx emission by 90%. It currently has over 2,000 pieces of equipment in 50 countries.

Aecometric was awarded The Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters 2005 Innovation Award for Environmental Technology as well as the Ontario Global Traders Award. It has been named by *Profit Magazine* as one of Canada’s 100 fastest growing companies for the last two years.

“I never expected to be in the leadership role,” says Anderson. “Keeping the company going after my husband’s illness became somewhat of a crusade. I was determined to make sure the company stayed alive.”

“Without my knowing it, my husband had been my mentor. We slowly began to reinvent the company as plants and refineries began dealing more through engineering companies than direct sales. In the last 12 years, Aecometric has taken the products my husband designed and brought them to global recognition. We still do a considerable amount of Research and Development, but more Development, using the base research he did.

“We are and have always been an export company. (85%-90% export) When 9/11 happened, all the large projects in the U.S were put on hold. We decided to go directly into China and the Middle East. We now have a plant in China and we are just opening an office in Puna, India.”

When Anderson became president, Aecometric was at \$1.7 million in revenue. It is now at \$23 million.

“As we grow, we are quickly putting in those structures and processes necessary to go from being an entrepreneurial company to having a strong structural platform for future growth,” she says. “I am determined to keep the culture of innovation we have within the company, along with the nimbleness to react to an ever-changing

at a recruitment office squelched that idea. She was hired on the spot, which led to three-and a-half years of apprenticeship learning the recruitment business. She then moved off to develop her own company with partners, working in operations, developing offices in booming Calgary, Edmonton, Vancouver and the U.S.. Along the way, her company entered a partnership with her husband’s company and he was president until Meingast took over.

In between all this, she helped raise stepchildren and, now has grandchildren. All live in Australia, where The Personnel Department also does business.

“I have an incredibly fulfilled life on every level,” she says. “I am grateful daily for it.”

Meingast was honoured with the Global Growth Award at the WPO’s 10th anniversary gala in November, 2007.

Nina Gupta is president of Greenlite Lighting Corporation, Pointe-Claire, Que., a \$30 million manufacturer and distributor of energy-efficient lighting products, specializing in compact fluorescent bulbs, and poised to reach \$100 million in the next two years with the addition of a new solar modular division.

Gupta relies on her WPO Montreal chapter peers—and her Blackberry which she calls indispensable, offering instant gratification to feed “my nervous, neurotic personality.”

“My family has always been in business, and we were always taught that, if you have a brain, use it,” says Gupta. “It was always a case of ‘Push harder. Work as hard as you can as long as you can’ — typical of an immigrant family,” she says of her Indian background.