

Fortune favours women on list

HELEN TRINCA | THE AUSTRALIAN | AUGUST 17, 2013 10:00AM

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Nikki Hills, who spent a decade in marketing in big companies, set up her own business after her first child was born. Picture: Simon Cockedge. Source: The Australian.

At a recent global conference for women entrepreneurs, an entire session was devoted to a discussion about how they could get on to various lists such as Fortune's Most Powerful Women in Business.

There was not a hint of irony in the room in Istanbul as a panel revealed the secrets of getting listed. It's hard to imagine men publicly discussing such tactics, but women entrepreneurs are on a roll.

Big claims are being made for the economic impact of women who set up and run their own businesses. According to research published in Forbes magazine in April, the growth of women-owned businesses between 1997 and 2013 in the US was higher than the national average: the number of businesses increased by 41 per cent but the number of women-owned ones increased by 59 per cent.

The surge has attracted attention from corporates and banks, which see an emerging and specific market to be tapped.

The entrepreneurs' conference cited above was run by Dell, the IT company. It was the fourth such annual event run by the Dell Women's Entrepreneur Network, and involved 150 women entrepreneurs from around the world.

Research released at the conference showed that of 17 countries surveyed, Australia ranked just below the US as the best place in the world to be an entrepreneur, thanks to education, access to finance and attitudes to gender.

It's a very positive story, although the scale of the sector is worth noting: about 95 per cent of women entrepreneurs in Australia are running companies with an annual turnover of less than \$1 million, according to a 2011 survey by the Australian Women Chamber of Commerce & Industry. Less than 2 per cent of women own \$5m-plus companies.

That's a long way from the vision of Wendy Simpson, chair of Springboard, an organisation that assists women entrepreneurs. She says the emphasis must be on women with higher ambitions.

"Women who want to go to \$50-\$100m need to understand the key inflection points that will bring their businesses to the next level," Simpson says.

Despite the statistics, Simpson says there is a new generation of women who are prepared to build a company and sell it.

"You meet women now who say, this is not my baby," she says. "They like taking a business through the growth phase but they have plenty of ideas, so they extract value and start another business."

But Yolanda Vega, chief executive of AWCCI, says that in general Australian women entrepreneurs don't want to grow too big: "They want to control their companies and they don't want an exit strategy."

She points out that 63 per cent of women entrepreneurs have businesses with turnovers of less than \$250,000, and doubts that Australia has the population to produce many \$50m female-led companies.

Even so, there is a generation of younger women who seem determined to have a go. They still struggle to get venture capital - about 95 per cent goes to men - but they are no longer so dependent on capital to get started or grow.

Simpson says technology is the great enabler. Tools such as cloud computing make starting up cheaper than ever.

There's also a discernible trend of women opting out of corporate life in search of flexible work, yet armed with experience in big business. "In order to disrupt an industry, you have to understand it," says Simpson. "A corporate woman who says, 'there has to be a better way of doing it,' can leave and then go back and pitch to the people she was working with. She can say, 'I know your industry, I know your cost structures.'"

There's also a subset of women who eschew corporations entirely and go directly into their own companies.

Roy Green, dean of the business school at the University of Technology, Sydney, says a lot of the young women - and men - entering the school don't wait to work for anyone but are "creating their own jobs". The phenomenon has prompted changes in UTS courses to prepare students for a life outside the corporates.

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Sydney entrepreneur Nikki Hills spent a decade in marketing in big companies.

After her first child was born she set up a small advertising agency, Eietta, in 2001, that was mainly staffed by women with children. It's still running, but in 2009 Hills set up Mouths of Mums - a research and content site whose 50,000 members share advice and review products and services for companies such as Woolworths, Procter & Gamble, Philips Avent and Toyota.

Hills parlayed her knowledge of what the big brands need into a site that offers multiple "conversations" with potential customers, and is now keen to apply the idea to other demographics, such as "grey nomads".

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The Houdens recently abandoned a planned acquisition in the US but, after a 15-minute meeting with Dell chief commercial officer Steve Felice on the fringes of the Istanbul meeting, are now working on an alternative expansion strategy in the US.

One of the key speakers in Istanbul, New Jersey-based Elisabete Miranda, has no compunctions about revealing her goals. A serial entrepreneur whose translation company, CQ fluency is her 10th business, she told The Australian that she has a very specific goal: to grow the company to the size where she can sell it and become an "angel investor" in other women's companies.

That's something Simpson would applaud.

Helen Trinca was a guest of Dell in Istanbul.