

**Opportunities and Challenges for Women Entrepreneurs on the  
20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Women's Business Ownership Act of 1988**  
Perspective of Virginia Littlejohn, Co-Founder and CEO, Quantum Leaps, Inc.  
Senate Small Business Committee Roundtable, September 9, 2008

**My Involvement with Women's Entrepreneurship:** I have been working with women entrepreneurial advocacy in the US since the 1970s. I consulted to the Carter Interagency Committee on Women's Business Enterprise, was the SBA's first National Women in Business Advocate of the Year in 1980, coordinated the initial lobbying program in support of the Office of Women's Business Ownership (OWBO) at the SBA, organized the National Association of Women Business Owners' (NAWBO) first two National Public Affairs Days in 1982 and 1983, was NAWBO National President in 1984-85, oversaw its international affiliation and the world's first women entrepreneurial trade mission in 1985, chaired NAWBO's initiative that resulted in getting 12% of the delegates to the 1986 White House Conference on Small Business, was one of the architects of the Women's Business Ownership Act of 1988, served two terms on the National Women's Business Council (NWBC), and spent a number of years working with the House and Senate Small Business Committees to refine the structure of the Council, to get the right representational mix. Since the mid 1980s, I have also worked extensively with governments and international organizations at the global level to share women entrepreneurial best practices: the OECD, the International Trade Center and other UN agencies, the World Bank and Global Banking Alliance for Women, Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation, etc.

Quantum Leaps, of which I am Co-Founder and CEO, identifies and shares women entrepreneurial best practices, and catalyzes strategic initiatives both domestically and internationally. We are currently working to facilitate women's access to corporate markets and global supply chains in the US, Canada, China and India. In addition, we are working with the NWBC and national women's business organizations to develop *The Roadmap to 2020* in the US, which I'll tell you more about in a minute.

**History of Women's Enterprise:** I have been asked to address some of the early history of women's business enterprise in the United States.

NAWBO was founded in 1974 in Washington DC, and for a number of years it was the primary WBO organization. It played a strategic advocacy role with both the executive branch, particularly during the Carter, Reagan and first Bush Administrations, plus various legislative hearings in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as several White House Conferences on Small Business.

Various challenges were identified in Congressional hearings in the House and Senate. By 1988, the year that the Women's Business Ownership Act passed, five major problem areas had been identified:

- **Data and statistics about women-owned businesses (WOBs)**, because only sole proprietorships were counted. This resulted in a public perception that women typically owned only small candle making and macramé businesses that they operated out of their basements, which grossed below \$10,000 in sales per year. This challenge was addressed by the mandate for a business census of all women-owned businesses via the Women's Business Ownership Act of 1988
- **Access to credit**, including business credit for women
- **Entrepreneurial education and training**, facilitated through creation of the Women's Business Centers, and more recent training initiatives focused on growth-oriented businesses
- **A voice for WBOs**, addressed through creation of the NWBC
- **And Federal procurement.** In one Congressional hearing in the late 1970s, which included the challenges that women business owners were having in accessing federal markets, one witness testified that when she had asked a federal procurement official how to access the federal market, he

had told her, "Sleep with the contracting officer." Within the women business owner community, this was referred to as the federal equivalent of the Hollywood casting couch.

The Women's Business Ownership Act of 1988 addressed all of these issues except for Federal procurement, which we and our champions on the Hill decided not to include in the legislation, in order to improve the chances of passage.

Since the passage of the Women's Business Ownership Act of 1988, a highly differentiated women entrepreneurial ecosystem has developed. Many new WBO groups have been created, to address emerging niches focused on growth, the need for angel and venture capital, access to corporate markets and supply chains, women of color, international trade, federal procurement, etal. And of course, WIPP was created as an umbrella organization to give all of us a powerful collective voice.

But a great deal still needs to be done. WIPP's *Blueprint* outlines some of immediate priorities. I would like to emphasize three issues:

- Access to federal procurement remains a huge area of underachievement, and is one of the biggest structural impediments to the economic advancement of women owned businesses in the US.
- Strategic research about women's enterprise development is critically important, and the crucial role played by the Center for Women's Business Research in helping "to make the economic case" cannot be overestimated. I would recommend federal funding for continued strategic research.
- And in my opinion, the National Women's Business Council needs to be structured in such a way that it includes continuity of institutional representatives from leading WBO associations, even if the number of association representatives has to be expanded and its budget has to be increased. While having individual women entrepreneurs representing both political parties is useful, the opportunity for all of the major associations to have a regular forum in which to share perspectives and to collaborate on advancing women's enterprise development is absolutely crucial. The Council's structure should be modified to facilitate this dialogue and consensus building.

To address longer term strategic gaps, Quantum Leaps is partnering with the National Women's Business Council and the major women's business groups to develop *The Roadmap to 2020: Fueling the Growth in Women's Enterprise Development in the US in the Coming Decade*. It is a strategic action plan that will be released in early 2009. Each contributing organization will take responsibility for implementing specific components that pertain to its core mission. *The Roadmap* will address strategic gaps in the women entrepreneurial ecosystem, and specific obstacles that still need to be overcome in such areas as research, "the missing middle," capital for growth, federal procurement, and access to global market opportunities.

*The Roadmap to 2020* will **blaze some important new trails** by:

- Collaborating with partners to develop strategies and tactics for building a dynamic global women's enterprise movement
- Encouraging American women entrepreneurial leaders to provide bold thinking and global leadership on strategic issues that policymakers must address
- Proposing metrics for measuring the social and economic return on investment (ROI) in women's enterprise development
- Promoting the need for creativity, innovation, R&D, strategic utilization of technology, alternative energy, and "clean and green" technologies
- Catalyzing the creation of a Women's Enterprise Development Philanthropy Initiative, to facilitate cooperative funding by major foundations, and contributions by successful women entrepreneurs who want to make a difference.

When *The Roadmap* is released, we very much hope that Congressional hearings will be held on its recommendations. And further, that the Senate Small Business Committee will once again play a strategic role in advancing the next stage of women entrepreneurial development in the United States.

Quantum Leaps, Inc.  
3566 13th Street NW, Suite 100  
Washington DC, 20010, USA  
Phone: 1-202-332-4411  
Fax: 1-202-318-4510  
Email: [vlittlejohn@quantumleapsinc.org](mailto:vlittlejohn@quantumleapsinc.org)  
Web: [www.quantumleapsinc.org](http://www.quantumleapsinc.org)