



BUSINESS NEWS

Networking, Mentorship Key for Women Who Own O&P Businesses

Research shows women acquire more education than men but own fewer businesses.

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Women continue to outpace men in terms of college enrollment and level of educational degrees, and the gap between men and women in the labor force continues to narrow – but women-owned businesses only make up 16% of employer firms, and their share of revenues and employees remain in the single-digits.

The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation identifies this gap as “an economic growth issue,” and recently released a survey of 350 women who were founding CEOs, presidents, chief technology officers or leaders of high-tech startup companies in a variety of industries and identified a number of challenges facing women who own businesses.

More women in the field, but few owning businesses

While women now hold a variety of leadership positions in the field of O&P – such as **Anita Liberman-Lampear, MA**, immediate past president of the American Orthotic & Prosthetic Association (AOPA), and its second woman president, and **Claudia Zacharias, MBA, CAE**, president and CEO of The Board of Certification/Accreditation (BOC) – women who own their own O&P practice still are few and far between.

“I actually have only met, in 20 years [as a consultant in the field of O&P], two female business owners. Maybe three,” **Joyce Perrone**, director of business development for De La Torre Orthotics & Prosthetics, Inc. and consulting partner for PROMISE Consulting, Inc., told *O&P Business News*.

Brooke Artesi, CP, LPO, owner of Sunshine Prosthetics & Orthotics, echoed that assessment. “I worked under a male [business owner] for my whole prosthetic and orthotic career until I opened my own practice,” she said. “I do not know why there are so few female [O&P] business owners. There are none around me. I met one other lady in New Jersey who owns her own practice.”

While women O&P business owners are still rare, Liberman-Lampear said the field has made leaps and bounds in terms of gender representation.

“When I first came into the field back in the early 1990s, there were very few women. It was a field mostly comprised of men because they learned from their fathers who learned from their fathers, and that is how the field started,” she said. “Now that [O&P education] has become something on a college level, more women have the opportunity to explore it.”



Anita Liberman-
Lampear



Claudia Zacharias

Perrone also has noticed a positive change throughout her time in the field.

“I came into this realm 20 years ago. It was a little different when I would go to meetings then. You would look out in the crowd and it would be all men ... Now I go and it is a very different audience. I love seeing more diversity,” she said.

Entrepreneurship a challenge throughout O&P

About 15% of firms included in the Kauffman survey were in the field of health care, wellness and medicine and the majority of firms surveyed were small, with more than 56% having between one and five employees. One of the primary concerns women identified for opening a business was availability of financial capital. Female O&P leaders agreed this concern affects everyone in the field, not just women.

Artesi said of financing, “I think that is everyone’s struggle in opening their own practice. They are scared of money and how to get it and what to do.”

She added, “You just have to go for it. You cannot just focus on [the business] failing. I opened Sunshine and it took off. My first thought was, I am going to work part-time, I am going to take care of my kid part-time, and it was just so busy. There is obviously a need for it.”

Search for mentors needs to expand

According to recent statistics, about 21% of ABC-certified O&P practitioners and 48% of BOC-certified practitioners are women, and even fewer own their own practice.

One point identified in the Kauffman survey that women in O&P were able to relate to was a lack of mentors in the field. Some women recommended looking at different fields, while others suggested looking beyond gender.

“I get a lot of calls from girls who are either going to school [for O&P] or want to go to school and want to shadow me – which is good. I am glad to see that turnaround. I think they seek me out because I am a female,” Artesi said.

“The mentor/mentee relationship is something I value highly and strongly believe in,” Zacharias said. “I have met many women in O&P who would make great mentors. If a woman is having difficulty finding a mentor, I would advise her to expand her search beyond the O&P field.”

Perrone said, “I would just find any business owner [as a mentor]. I would not be gender specific. I think sometimes we make our own glass ceiling.”

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Liberman-Lamphear agreed, stating, “They should look to people who know what they are doing. They should seek out people who are good and have been successful and have made a difference. That is who you want for your mentor. It does not matter if they are a man or a woman. You want the best.”

Zacharias added, “I would be happy to help find a mentor for any practitioner who would like some assistance in finding one. I also have experience in developing mentor-mentee ‘contracts’ that spell out each party’s expectations and I would be willing to provide assistance with that, too.”

