

Paving the Way to Success

Máire Walsh, SVP, Digital Technologies at Enterprise Ireland's Silicon Valley office discusses the role played by the state agency in assisting Irish start-ups to succeed in the US and reveals the growing impact of Enterprise Ireland's Female Entrepreneurship unit which supports ambitious female entrepreneurs through funding, knowledge and special networking events.

Could you give us a brief introduction to Enterprise Ireland and what it's doing for the startup scene?

Enterprise Ireland is the venture capital arm of the Irish government. We work in partnership with Irish enterprises to help them start, innovate, and scale globally through funding, advisory, and partnerships.

We have invested in over a thousand startups from seed to Series A and are the largest seed stage investor in Europe and third largest VC in the world by deal flow. We have 33 offices globally.

What is your role at Enterprise Ireland?

I'm the SVP of Digital Technologies based in our Silicon Valley office. Our office works with the top 10% of Irish companies. My focus is on Enterprise SaaS, SaaS and travel tech companies that foster innovation, solve business problems, and deliver significant value to clients and partners.

Can you tell us a little bit about your career path?

After finishing a Master's in Business Studies at NUI Galway in 2001, I wanted to experience the world; and the U.S. offered a window into adventure and possibilities. From managing an ecommerce store; to becoming a partner in a consulting business, and through board service, I've been lucky to have always worked with talented team players and exceptional mentors. I've also worked in partnership with leading media and tech companies where being innovative, creative, and driven helped propel success. Key to all my experience were relationships formed and nurtured. At the end of the day, people and the relationships you build, make all the difference.

What do you think is the biggest challenge for women as they start a new business?

Earning respect can be hard for women as they start a new business. Respect from investors, key stakeholders, and potential partners can be hard won. Many female entrepreneurs need to work harder to gain credibility, however, this can strengthen their resolve to succeed.



Female Entrepreneurship clients at the Enterprise Ireland HPSU Showcase 2017"

What steps has Enterprise Ireland taken to encourage more women to start new businesses?

At Enterprise Ireland, our CEO Julie Sinnamon is a woman that grew through the ranks to now lead our organization. Through her leadership, and that of Sarita Johnston, we established the Enterprise Ireland Female Entrepreneurship Unit in response to an underrepresentation of female entrepreneurs in Ireland. Our purpose is to support ambitious female entrepreneurs through funding, knowledge, special networking events so they are fully equipped to launch and grow high potential startups. In 2017 we made 67 investments female led startups, which now equates to approximately 37% of our total annual deal flow. Enterprise Ireland's objective is for investments in female led start-ups to exceed 50% of our total deal flow in the coming years.

Has mentorship made a difference in your professional and personal life? If so, how?

Yes, I truly value mentorship and have been lucky enough that it has made a difference in my professional and personal life, and in fact in many cases, it has been intertwined. My experience working, or volunteering for

women's leadership or arts organizations, coupled with playing soccer for over ten years with people from all walks of life has unwrapped mentorship in many ways.

Which female leader do you most admire and why?

I've always admired Mary Robinson, the first female President of Ireland. When she was running for office, I was highly influenced by the fact that someone from my home county of Mayo could reach such heights. One of the primary reasons I admire her is her work did not end when her presidency did; she went on to become a leader in the UN and was a role model for women throughout the world. On a more personal level, my grandmother Nora, mother Rita, and sister Catherine have always been hugely influential.

What advice would you give to a young person who is contemplating starting their own business?

Believe in yourself and your drive to succeed. Ask for help, people like helping people. Put yourself out there—attend networking events, explore mentorship opportunities, speak at conferences. Arm yourself with fundraising knowledge. Never stop selling.