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Women in Localization
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According to "The Athena Factor," a report published in the Harvard Business Review in 2008, women in tech often suffer career stagnation at the mid-point of their careers, a time when their male counterparts begin to move up. It is reported that women who do succeed, regularly experience great difficulty in capitalizing on their success. Lack of support from senior management in defining a career path, including sponsorship and mentoring, was found to be critical in this failing.

Since then, it seems evident, not much has changed and the tech industries still prove a challenge for well-qualified women to enjoy employment on equal terms with their male counterparts. The education system admits women as students in technical disciplines and many go on to enjoy considerable success. However, graduating with a good degree is no guarantee of a good job with conditions to suit women. Any initiatives that aim to remedy this imbalance receive favorable publicity, but these are still inadequate in remediying failures that leave many female employees disenchanted and unfulfilled in their careers.

The struggle of women in tech, it is clear, goes on. Will it ever change? In fact, there are signs that it is. A number of organizations have been founded within the past couple of decades with the aim of enabling women to compete fairly in engineering, computing, IT and similar industries. Localization is no exception, with women, until recently, mostly having linguistic and support roles. However, this is rapidly changing and an organization that is spearheading the promotion of women’s successful careers is Women in Localization. Its charter is to promote professional development, networking, and continuous education among its rapidly-growing global membership of well-qualified, ambitious, very capable and highly-motivated women professionals.

The same year that “The Athena Factor” came out, three team members at VeriSign, in the San Francisco Bay Area, were getting together after work and exchanging professional experiences in the workplace, as we all do. The three friends were Silvia Avary-Silveira, a native of Brazil, a veterinary doctor turned localization expert and currently Web Globalization Manager at Juniper Networks; Anna Schlegel, a native of Catalonia, fluent in six languages and currently Sr. Director of Globalization and Information Engineering in NetApp; and Eva Klaudinyova, a foreign language teacher and professional linguist from Slovakia, now a senior localization manager working for one of the biggest companies in Silicon Valley. Their friendship continued even after they moved to different companies, and during regular dinners, they discussed professional problems and supported each other in every way they could. The idea to form a network known as the “Northern California Women in Localization” was a natural next step. Their objective was to meet other women localization professionals to share ideas, knowledge and to help one another. They were focused on being local to ensure face-to-face meetings. Their motto at the time was “Think big, start small, scale fast.” During the following years, this is exactly what they have accomplished.
In 2008 they could not envision that their strong friendship would start a group that today has more than two thousand members and a growing body of chapters around the world. Their goal is the same regardless of location, to provide their members with opportunities to meet locally, enable and support each other, and offer as many networking events as possible.

On a regular basis, Women in Localization organizes local events in which people in the field are invited to participate and network. Events can be a presentation on trends from an industry expert, a discussion on how to advance one’s career, or understanding the latest globalization tools. Typically, Women in Localization chooses a sponsor for each event to provide refreshments and potentially a physical space for the event. The sponsors are always recognized at the beginning of each event and some have repeated sponsorships year after year. Networking happens before and after the actual presentation, panel or discussion. Every new participant attending is greeted and introduced to a few people by the Board Members.

Let’s pause to consider how the traditional discipline of translation has burgeoned into localization with the aim of uniting all users with each other in all markets in a worldwide setting. The advent of personal computing and its development of artificial intelligence, global high-speed networks and mobile telephony are offering businesses and individuals unprecedented opportunities to communicate with each other. Information sharing has become so commonplace and so omnipresent that new paradigms of personal identity are being forged. The fact that what is communicated in one language is also enabled in a quite different language is thanks to technology and the skills of those who wield its awesome power. What was essentially a cottage industry a few decades ago is now a business imperative of colossal magnitude.

With the above in mind, it’s easy to see how Women In Localization has grown from its extremely modest beginning to gain increasing momentum as an organization with an international presence. Furthermore, it is a mark of the founders’ success that their original goal of providing mutual support is portable across linguistic and cultural boundaries, empowering women to succeed in business on their own terms. This is not surprising given that the three founders have quite diverse backgrounds, but recognized within each other the same characteristics that allowed them to react honestly and critically to each other while forging a strong partnership. Indeed, they feel that their initial bond is as strong as ever. It is quite remarkable what they have achieved together.

Over the years the organization has also managed to attract other successful women to its Board. The Board members are reviewed annually and their commitment has helped the organization move into its growth phase. Each Board Member has responsibility to drive a particular charter and goals are revised regularly. The compilation of strong leadership from the Board has accelerated its position and reach. New ideas and access to more sponsors and resources have enabled Women in Localization to reach wider audiences, increase memberships and create new chapters around the world.

It has always been a goal in the organization to reach out to other women and where possible to mentor and advise them as they tussle to make their way through the business minefield. The challenge has been, however, to maintain the fluidity and informality of simply getting together while creating an organization that requires standards, regulations and that accommodates
Anna Schlegel, co-founder, describes the new mentoring program: “Women in Localization has been a test-bed for mentoring since day one. We started the organization to network, mentor and encourage others to grow in our space. Each one of us is a natural mentor, we sit at cafes with newcomers, get emails from graduates who are looking for direction. In 2014, we kicked off a mentoring track that is speeding up the entry of women into our space. It is beautiful to see how women of all ages feel that they can ask anything to fulfill their empowerment.”

Di Jin, describes how she attended her first Women in Localization event in September 2014 after losing her job as a Localization Project Manager. That event was entitled “Globalization Speed Mentoring,” and she explains how she was able to obtain guidance on how she might best proceed in her search for new employment. As she relates, “Each table had one mentor and the ‘mentees’ cycled through the tables and could ask the experienced mentors questions relating to the station, or just general questions.” Meeting Anna Schlegel, who was running the Globalization Strategies station, Di picked up tips on relevant reading material. They also discussed what Anna thought might be “good decisions in her career,” and benefited from Anna’s experiences from the challenges she had faced in her career.
Taking heart from this meeting, Di tackled the difficult task of job hunting. After many rounds of interviews she was faced with the enviable, but still stressful, decision between a highly respected localization vendor and a client-side program management position at a leading Bay Area technology company. Both positions seemed exciting with room to grow and both had comparable pay and benefits. She was torn and was really having a hard time trying to decide. She decided to reach out to Anna and see if she had any advice that could help. Anna responded by helping Di organize her thoughts and to draw up a list of pros and cons for each position. In the end, Di decided to step out of her comfort zone and try something new, so she chose the client-side. Anna was also able to fill her in with some knowledge about the localization group in that company and when she discovered which company it was, according to Di, “...she highly recommended it since she was familiar with the localization leadership there and knew that they were a well-respected and growing business unit. And I listened to her.”

Another localization professional who has been kind enough to share her experience with Women in Localization is Sheena Makhecha. She joined Women in Localization early 2015 and immediately felt welcomed by all the members during the attendance of her first event. She walked away feeling really inspired, comfortable and a little more educated about localization from some incredibly strong and successful women, which seems to be rare in Silicon Valley. “I think the one moment that I really felt that this organization is incredibly beneficial to me as a woman was when I attended a mentoring event and heard a member speak of her experience with wanting to find time for herself and her family in a day. As she spoke of being a new mom and working incredibly long hours at her job as this was expected of her, I immediately related to her with going through a similar experience as a new mom. At that moment, I thought to myself - I know here I am understood.”

Sheena’s story shows the benefits of sharing our experiences as women professionals in the workplace and in our home lives. Discovering how others manage to combine these quite different spheres of life can be pivotal in directing younger and less-experienced women towards fulfillment. What Women in Localization has done from its very inception is open lines of communication between women that otherwise might never have happened except by chance.

Women in Localization is also partnering with other organizations to bring more opportunities to its members. Through these new partnerships, they will be able to offer conference discounts and extended opportunities for networking. During the LocWorld conferences, members are able to meet around a lunch table. With Information Development World, members get a discount to attend the conference and even if they do not attend, they can still visit the event session organized by Women in Localization. Another great partnership being developed currently is with GALA, which will grant members access to free industry webinars. Moreover, Women in Localization is putting together an entire track at the GALA conference in NY 2016. Members will have conference discount and can submit their papers exclusively to the Women in Localization track. Co-Founder Silvia Avary-Silveira explains, “Through these new partnerships we are giving our members the chance to share their ideas, to leave their comfort zones and get some industry exposure.”

Some organizations that support women’s rights and empowerment fall in the trap of the “us against them” mentality. This is far from the case with Women in Localization. In 2013 the Board voted to allow men to attend events and gatherings while enabling its women members as the
organizers, members of panels, and experts on topics. There is no hidden agenda of promoting women over men or any other gender in-equality. On the contrary, Women in Localization stresses the importance of an all-inclusive equal workplace. As chairwoman Silvia Avary-Silveira, emphasizes "We are a women focused and men inclusive organization"

The organic growth of Women in Localization from small, informal get-togethers into a dynamic organization that is truly helping women across the globe is praiseworthy indeed. The nucleus of Women in Localization is still the founders, but their wish to influence other women and assist them in forging their careers is resulting in an association with global influence that is poised to establish itself with solid credentials. A talented Board is in place, a website is up and running, funding is being addressed, membership is accruing and consideration to give it an appropriate legal status is underway. The future for Women in Localization looks auspicious for what started as a friendship that became a group that became an organization that is now a movement.