

REENGINEERING THE OTTAWA-CARLETON WISE CHAPTER

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to outline the history of the Ottawa-Carleton WISE Chapter – its creation, the possible events that led to its inactivity, its revitalization in 1997, its current events and goals, and its future. The roles of the executive members are defined to explain the Chapter's organizational structure. Challenges common to women's organizations are discussed, and the Ottawa-Carleton Chapter's approaches to deal with these issues are presented. The answers to an informal survey of its WISE members offer insight into the members' interests and availability for events. Finally, networking with other local organizations is emphasized in order to bring together more women in male-dominated disciplines.

INTRODUCTION

The North American working environment is still a man's world with masculine ideals, such as long working hours to succeed in work and in life. Women who pause their careers to have children are viewed as not taking their work seriously. Even the method of determining research excellence in academia has masculine overtones: "publish or perish" – suggesting that quantity is preferred over quality of work.

This pattern is slowly changing, but many women still work two full time "jobs" (i.e., work and home life), because not all men are sharing household and family responsibilities equally with their working wives. This situation brings about the need for a women's support group for networking and sharing experiences, and hence led to the creation of the women organizations such as Women in Science and Engineering, otherwise known as WISE.

THE CREATION OF WISE

WISE's History

Concurrent with other grassroots organizations growing in the 1970s, a national organization to connect Canadian women scientists and engineers was founded in 1977 by Claudette Mackay-Lassonde. With the WISE national headquarters in Toronto, ON, local chapters formed in Toronto, Ottawa, Sarnia, Kingston, Montreal, Newfoundland, and New Brunswick during the following decade. A few women from the United States, Europe and Africa also joined WISE. The main objectives of the organization were and continue to be: To encourage women to seek higher education and achievements, and to assist women entering into science or engineering [1].

In Recent Years

In the past few years, the national chapter and some of the local chapters became inactive. Declining membership and a lack of coordination between the local chapters and the national WISE branch led to the national branch folding in 1996. The national executive for WISE became redundant when CCWEST (Canadian Coalition of Women Engineers, Scientists, and Technologists) was formed in 1993 by Susan Best. This group connects approximately twenty or more local chapters whose mandates are related to women in these fields. Two WISE Chapters (Newfoundland and Ottawa-Carleton) joined CCWEST in 1998 and are represented on its Board. A new WISE Chapter was created in Sudbury in December 1998, and was launched in January 1999 [1].

THE OTTAWA-CARLETON WISE CHAPTER

A Brief History

The Ottawa-Carleton WISE Chapter was founded in 1986, and sustained a successful existence for many years. However, after about a decade with the same women cycling through the executive positions, the organization began to suffer from fatigue. Fatigue is a very common symptom in women's organizations.

There were several possible reasons leading up to the lapse of interest in the WISE Chapter including the organization of too many events each year (nearly one each month from September to May) which could cause undue pressure to attend all meetings, and a shortage of members interested in executive positions to provide change and a fresh outlook on the WISE principles and program. The executive minutes also reflect the fact that some members felt the meetings had become "whiny" in that no pro-active solutions were presented to the members about how to improve their situation in the workplace. The executive responded by inviting speakers to discuss women's successes in these fields, and other positive role models [2].

Despite these efforts, the number of activities decreased and it was necessary to consider the fate of the Chapter – whether it should fold, or whether it could be given new life and flourish. Following a meeting in July 1996 with the NSERC/Nortel Chair for WISE in Ontario, Monique Frize, and three other dedicated members of the WISE Chapter, the Ottawa-Carleton WISE Chapter was revived in November 1997, and the new executive was elected [1].

Today's Ottawa-Carleton WISE Chapter

The original focus of the Chapter was professional women in engineering and science, although student members also participated. By September 1998, two student branches were established at the local universities, the University of Ottawa and Carleton University. This new initiative aimed to produce a program for the student members on issues that would benefit them the most. Student members maintain their connection with the Chapter by receiving the Chapter's newsletter, and often attend their events.

In 1998-1999, there were 125 regular and student members of the Ottawa-Carleton WISE Chapter. For the 1999-2000 year, the Ottawa-Carleton Chapter of WISE had 60 regular members, 57 student members from the University of Ottawa, and 32 student members from Carleton University making a total of 149 members.

Not only has WISE increased in number over the past few years, but also in diversity. Professional women outside the scientific community have joined the Ottawa-Carleton Chapter, as well as women from different industrial and governmental sectors. The focus of the current executive for the upcoming year is to work together with other women's organizations like Pathmakers, the IEEE's (Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers) Women in Engineering, Wired Women, and WITT (Women in Trades and Technology) to promote women in science and engineering in the Capital Region.

In addition to meeting the needs of its members, WISE Ottawa-Carleton continues to increase its profile in the community. The Chapter is working with the NSERC/Nortel Chair for WISE in Ontario and CCWEST to organize the next ICWES conference to be held in Ottawa in July 2002. The student branches also developed the WISE National Student Network (NSN) in conjunction with the University of Victoria student branch to provide a national support and resource network for university/college student groups concerned with improving the status of women in science and engineering.

WISE's Organizational Structure. The Executive Positions available within the Ottawa-Carleton WISE Chapter are: President, Vice President, Past President, Treasurer, Publications and Public Relations Coordinator, Program Coordinator, Secretary, Professional Outreach Coordinator, Education Outreach Coordinator, Website Coordinator, Carleton University WISE Student Branch Representative, University of Ottawa WISE Student Branch Representative, and CCWEST Representative.

The President is the main representative of the Chapter. Her aim is to promote the Chapter in the community and industry, set objectives for the year with the other executive members, organize and chair executive meetings, liaise with other organizations and other WISE chapters, and provide leadership to the Chapter. The President also maintains contact with the corporate sponsors and seeks out new WISE sponsors. The Vice President supports the President in carrying out her duties, and assumes the duties of the President in her absence. The Treasurer maintains up-to-date financial and membership records, receives applications/renewal membership information, and shares signing authority with the President on all Chapter documents. The Program Coordinator organizes four to six events per year. Her responsibilities include contacting speaker, setting up facility, and providing input to newsletter. The entire Executive assists the Program Coordinator in finding contacts. The duties of the Publications and Public Relations Coordinator are to prepare and distribute the newsletter. The newsletter may contain additional articles of interest to the members, as well as the announcements of the upcoming events. This

person also acts as the prime contact for any public relations requirements, and searches out opportunities to provide relations for the Chapter. The Secretary writes and distributes the minutes of all WISE executive meetings. The Education Outreach and Professional Outreach Coordinators liaise or establish programs with schools and other established programs such as Pathmakers and Let's Talk Science. They also provide support to and liaise with the student branches at the Universities of Ottawa and Carleton, and interact with other professional organizations related to science and engineering such as the IEEE's branch of Women in Engineering (WIE). The CCWEST Representative acts as a liaison between the Ottawa-Carleton Chapter and the Canadian Coalition of Women in Engineering, Science and Technology. In 1999, the Ottawa-Carleton WISE Chapter created a new executive position for the Website Coordinator whose responsibility is was to maintain and improve the existing website. The Chapter executive members also include representatives from the student branches at the University of Ottawa and Carleton University.

WISE Events. Since its revival in 1997, the Ottawa-Carleton WISE Chapter has opted to reduce the number of events offered each year to six events (four regular meetings, one dinner event, and an Annual General Meeting). A survey indicated that most members preferred to receive the WISE newsletter by email in a text format within the email message. There are approximately four newsletters distributed by email each year, and the newsletters are also posted on the Chapter's website (<http://www.carleton.ca/wise/wiseinfo.htm>).

The Chapter has tried to maintain a balance of topics for WISE meetings. Some events were of general interest, like the annual wine and cheese networking event, autobiographical success stories by prominent women in Canada and the US, and balancing your life, career, family and femininity; others focused on specific issues such as self-defense and safety issues, and a graduate studies information night. The Chapter organizes one dinner event each year with a general interest topic, where members are welcomed to invite their significant others or male friends. This year we invited both women and men to a video on the differences between men and women that was followed by a lively discussion. This was our first event that specifically targeted both genders, as it was meant to be a learning environment on how to better communicate with the opposite sex. A few men attended the event, and everyone thoroughly enjoyed the evening.

In general, each event attracts between twenty and forty people. The more focused the topic, the fewer the attendees. For example, the panel discussion on graduate studies was only attended by those interested in continuing their education, thereby limited the audience to mostly professionals looking to complete their master's part-time and undergraduate students. The dinner presentations generally have a larger audience (50-80 people), and the Annual General Meeting draws about 25 individuals.

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Financial Resources

Women's groups typically suffer from a shortage of financial resources. Fortunately, the Ottawa-Carleton WISE Chapter has been actively seeking corporate sponsorship since its re-inception in 1997, and with the support of the NSERC/Nortel WISE Chair for Ontario, Monique Frize, the Chapter has obtained four corporate sponsorships. There are three levels of sponsorship: silver, gold and platinum. A silver sponsorship requires a donation of \$250 to \$500, and the company's name will appear in our newsletters. This also includes a one-year WISE membership for one person in their organization. A gold sponsorship of \$500 to \$1000 entitles the company to three one-year memberships to WISE for their employees, and their company name appears in our newsletters. For donations over \$1000, a company receives platinum status. Their company logo and name appear in our newsletters, plus five members of their organization can have one-year memberships to WISE.

Members' Interests and Schedules

Since women are usually overextended as they attempt to balance their career, life and family, another challenge associated with women's organizations is fitting into the members' schedules, and identifying their interests. Based on the attendance at the WISE events, it appears that generally the students are more interested in safety issues than the professional women. A recent survey of the WISE members indicated that the most common reason for not attending a WISE meeting was that the date conflicted with their schedule. The second most common reason was that they were too busy with the work, school or family. This indicates that the subjects of the event were of interest to the members, but it was a scheduling conflict that prevented them from attending [3].

In the survey, the women were asked which events they would be most interested in seeing WISE organize. The majority of the respondents requested guest speakers telling life stories or motivational speeches, industry tours, information on specific careers, professional advancement meetings, and presentations on current events. The survey polled the members to determine which evenings and times were preferable for WISE meetings. Surprisingly

enough, each day except Saturday (which received the fewest votes) received a nearly equal number of votes. This shows the diversity of our WISE membership. Typically, for women with families, weekends are not suitable because this is family time. However, for single women or students, weekends work well due to constraints of evening courses, homework, team sports, and other social activities. Also, the most suitable time for the events were voted as 7-9pm or 6-8pm [3]. The WISE executive for 2000-01 will attempt to incorporate the members' preferences into the events offered next year.

Associate Membership

In response to several members stating that they were unable to renew their membership due to family obligations, a new membership category ("associate members") is in development. The objective of this category is to retain women who would like to focus on their family while keeping involved with WISE without the commitment brought on by a full membership. The general feeling is that these women would like to remain a member of WISE, but do not foresee enough free time to attend the events. Most also mention that they intend to reconnect with WISE once this busy period subsides. The benefit of this initiative is that women would be able to remain current with WISE's activities by receiving the newsletter by email, and at the same time WISE could receive some revenue from these members to help sustain the organization. The associate membership would relieve the feeling of obligation to attend meetings, but also maintain contact with the organization. It is hoped that some of the members who have let their memberships lapse due to other obligations will feel inclined to reconnect with WISE through this initiative, and eventually join WISE again when time constraints allow it. The associate members would receive the newsletter and be allowed to attend meetings, however, they would not receive the subsidized prices for the events that full members do. According to the survey, about half of the respondents would be interested in such a membership category [3].

Succession Planning

Before its third year of revival, one can already sense the possibility that the Ottawa-Carleton WISE Chapter could face the same commitment issues as before. There was little change in the executive roles during the second year, and these coming elections will have very few members of the executive stay for a third year. Certainly, change is favourable to prevent "fatigue", but that also leaves a lot of vacant positions. Succession planning is the key. It is important for the current executive to get to know its members, and identify women who might be interested in joining the executive in the future.

THE FUTURE OF WISE

How Do We Define Success?

This is an important question to ask oneself when re-evaluating the status of women organizations. Is success measured by the number of members in an organization, or as being a supportive network for the women who need it? Success defined in terms of active participants is not truly applicable to women's groups. Women's organizations must be conscious of and sensitive to the numerous roles that women play (professional/mother/wife) on a daily basis. Given those constraints, success should be viewed in terms of members' satisfaction with the events offered and by the networking opportunities presented to its members. Therefore, regardless of the frequency of the members' attendance at WISE events, this is an opportunity to maintain links with other successful women in science and engineering, to support the members in their careers, and to enhance women's role in science and engineering in society.

Where Do We Go From Here?

WISE and other local support groups for women scientists, engineers and technologists should attempt to strengthen their bonds with each other. For example, in Ottawa, the Chapter has made contact with other women's groups such as Pathmakers, WITT (Women in Trades and Technology), Wired Women, and IEEE's Women in Engineering. Each group should have an executive member whose role it is to liaise between the different organizations, and keep each other up-to-date on their events. The easiest methods would be through email and by maintaining a website that details the events being held in each chapter with links to the other organizations.

For more information about the Ottawa-Carleton WISE Chapter and its Student Branches, refer to the following websites:

WISE Chapter

<http://www.carleton.ca/wise/wiseinfo.htm>

Carleton University Student Branch

<http://www.wise.engsoc.carleton.ca>

University of Ottawa Student Branch

<http://www.science.uottawa.ca/wise>

<http://www.science.uottawa.ca/cfsg>

WISE Chair for Ontario

<http://www.carleton.ca/wise>

<http://www.genie.uottawa.ca/wise>

REFERENCES

- [1] M. Frize, "President's Report", Ottawa-Carleton WISE Chapter's Annual General Meeting Report, 1999.
- [2] Minutes of WISE/CFSG National Annual General Meeting, May 4, 1996.
- [3] C.M. Ennett, "Membership Survey Results", Ottawa-Carleton WISE Chapter's Annual General Meeting Report, 2000.