

BUSINESS



Women in IT Connect to Russia

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Photo by FOR SPT

The Russian chapter of World Women in IT network, recently launched in St. Petersburg, promises to be the first organization that will unite Russian-speaking business women all over the world, its executive directors say.

Women in IT (WIT) is an online network for career-driven women that was originally founded in 1999 by Liz Ryan, the first female vice president of U.S. Robotics, a major technology company.

In just over five years the organization has grown to encompass more than 35,000 women globally, all of whom can keep in contact via moderated, local e-mail discussion groups. There are over 70 WIT branches worldwide, and RusWIT is the organization's ninth European chapter.

"WIT members submit their questions and business tips, share work experiences and useful contacts," said Jane Kurts, RusWIT executive director.

A St. Petersburg native, Kurts received a degree from New York University in the U.S. at the age of 25 and returned to the city to become a communications vice president at DataArt, a local software outsourcing company.

Along with her friend and colleague Yulia Zavilevskaya, who will co-direct the chapter, Kurts hopes the St. Petersburg-based online community will give Russian working women worldwide "a valuable tool for business and social communications."

"Russian-speaking women live in different countries and cultures. They have many interesting experiences to share and to learn from each other," Kurts said. As an example, she adds that women working in Asia, which is experiencing an economic boom, could connect to those who work in Arab countries, where the role of women in business is starting to change.

Choosing St. Petersburg as the base for the Russian chapter of WIT is not simply a hark back to the organizer's roots, says the founder and CEO of WIT, Liz Ryan. It reflects the city's growing fame as the IT capital of Russia.

"St. Petersburg represents Russia's business and technology hub, overflowing with women who make a difference to the country's prosperity," Ryan said in a statement. "[RusWIT] will unite friendly, accomplished and resourceful women in Russia to share

their experiences and help one another advance their careers."

The mail-out to RusWIT's members will be written in both Cyrillic and English. The organization is also planning to hold 'in-person' events, at least for those of its members living in St. Petersburg.

The first event will be a round-table discussion held via a videoconference with other WIT members worldwide.

Although the network's launch was originally announced at the beginning of February, the hold-up, rather ironically, came in the form of a computer glitch. RusWIT's mail-outs hit a problem with decoding Russian letters - a common issue faced by those working with different Cyrillic fonts over the Internet. Nonetheless, Kurt promises that RusWIT will hold its first round-table as soon as the fonts issue is resolved.

Membership of RusWIT is free and can be completed at the network's main web page. Though member names are not disclosed - Kurts says she doesn't know who the local members are - more than 40 women have already registered in the Russian chapter. "Not bad given the country's business environment," Kurts says.

For now, Russia's most affluent women are still those who have become so through marriage not career, but the situation is changing.

According to a Finans magazine survey published last week, Russia's richest woman is Yelena Baturina, wife of Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov, but its most successful female is the general director of Basoviye Elementy (Basic Elements,) Gulzhan Moldazhanova, a self-made woman who started as a secretary at the company.

RusWIT sees its prospective members as active women with business savvy who live both locally and abroad. The idea of joining sounds appealing to Tatyana Gavrilova, an IT analyst at Morgan Stanley in New York, who left Russia over fifteen years ago.

"I would be very interested to "connect" with Russian women working in other countries and find out about the different business environments," Gavrilova said in a phone interview from New York.

"It would be good to read first-hand news from fellow professionals in St. Petersburg and find out about the differences or the similarities in various work-related issues," she said.

Kurts and Zavilevskaya decided to launch the Russian chapter of the WIT network after being long-time members of the network's New York branch.

"WIT is really for all women in business, not just for women in IT. However, since IT is a heavily male-dominated field, [the network] is an especially important tool for women working in that sphere," Kurts said.

Yet, the network does not set to exclude men.

"Actually, [after the launch] the first request to join RusWIT received was from a male journalist," Kurts said.