A diverse message



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Women in Tax aims to raise the voices of women working in all spheres of tax, writes *Georgiana Head*

Women in Tax is quite simply a network for women working in tax – in the profession, in-house, HMRC or anywhere else. Founded in London in 2015 by Heather Self, who is a tax partner at Blick Rothenberg and former Chair of the CIOT Technical Committee, Women in Tax now has branches throughout the UK.

Initially, the idea of Women in Tax – or WIT as it is affectionately known – was to raise the voice of women working in tax, and to try and stop 'Manels' (all-male panels) at key events in the tax industry. I remember the event which kicked off the

idea for the network. The Chair congratulated the panel for being diverse, as it included a tax lawyer as well as accountants and tax advisers. All the panellists were white and male!

The development of WIT

Heather Self knew that she couldn't force diversity on to the tax profession but felt that she might be able to help women to advance and have their voices heard – as she says, to 'feed the change'. A successful way of doing this was to encourage people to put women on their events organising committees. As Heather explained: 'Previously, people had been addressing the matter of whether the panel was diverse at the last minute. The mindset began to change.'

Next, WIT started doing small scale technical seminars as a way of encouraging their more junior members to 'practise the process' so that they would gain the skills to be able to present in public in the future. It became a 'safe space' for mentoring. It became apparent that although tax professionals had other ways of gaining technical training, what they really valued was somewhere that they could discuss their everyday worries, such as how to balance work and a family. As Heather said: 'It was an opportunity for women to ask other women about their personal questions.' They could discuss the sort of things that you wouldn't dare raise at work in case it meant you were viewed differently.

So whilst WIT had always been planned as a support network, it developed in a different way. The events that tend to be successful and highly attended throughout the country are those which have a professional skills focus, whether it be about coping with impostor syndrome, or how to feel more confident when conducting a meeting.

A chance to network

A key element of the events is time to network. Several branches do monthly breakfast networking. When technical or business skills seminars are run, there is the opportunity for networking before or afterwards. An example of a highly attended meeting was the Leeds Branch 2019 panel event called 'Demystifying HMRC', where female HMRC staff from a wide range of backgrounds and ages talked about their careers at HMRC.

WIT has strong links with the ATT and CIOT. Last year, they held a joint event for International Women's Day and they would like to work together to address the challenges women face after a career break. Increasingly, the WIT branches are building links with local ATT and CIOT branches to offer joint events to members.

Obviously, in the strange world of Covid-19 we have had to change the way in which WIT interacts with members. Current chair Rhiannon Kinghall Were, a chartered tax advisor with Macfarlanes, has begun to develop online seminars such as 'Find your strong: strategies to help you feel empowered, positive and resilient'. Rhiannon believes that supporting women is one aspect of creating an inclusive and diverse tax industry and is keen to collaborate with other groups. These seminars can be found on Eventbrite (search for Women in Tax) and are open to everyone – female or otherwise.

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Twitter: @WomeninTax
Linkedin Group: Women in Tax UK