

In2ition: Powerful Women of Canadian Real Estate



Real estate is an industry where Canadian women have carved out a strong presence. Traditionally, female consumers have made the final decision on home choice, and this has created tremendous success for many female real estate agents.

In2ition: (L-R) Liana Pronio, Director of Sales, Lysha DeFreitas, Director of Operations, Jackie Pezer-Lilic, Director of Design Services, Debbie Cosic, CEO & Founder, Vesna Sola, Director of Sales.

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Women who were successful agents became managers in larger companies. Some are leaders, especially in sales and marketing. Factor in decades of an industry filled with women and we find the cream of the crop rising to the top of the industry, founding their own companies with tremendous success and billions of dollars in sales.

It's not surprising to hear that one of Canada's fastest-growing real estate sales and marketing companies is owned by a woman, and run by powerful female directors and managers.

In2ition, founded by Debbie Cosic, has created a company culture tailored to the realities of women's lives. Cosic actively seeks out powerful female leaders and recruits them. She has created a supportive and flexible environment in a fast-paced industry with notoriously endless workdays.

"It's a kinder, gentler environment, as tough as the industry is, and as tough as the girls are," Cosic said. "It makes us all stronger when we face the world out there."

What are the tangible results of all this feminine sensitivity and responsiveness? In2ition is officially six years old yet it has expanded nationally and internationally at a rapid pace, nipping at the heels of competitors who've been around for decades.

We met with Cosic and the top four of her seventeen executives: Liana

Pronio, director of sales; Vesna Sola, director of sales; Lysha DeFreitas, director of operations; and Jackie Pezer-Lilic, director of design services.

"These four ladies help me run the company," says Cosic. "I believe I have four of the best, brightest, most talented directors in this industry. Together as a team we are going to take this company to unprecedented highs."

Hunting for Talent

Cosic looks for a specific type of woman—powerful, competent, and fearless, thriving on challenge with the ability to see her long-term vision.

DeFreitas is the company's oldest employee, working with Cosic when the company had only three employees. Now director of operations, she started as a receptionist while still in university.

"She was always a star no matter what role it was. She has the ability to excel at anything. Who couldn't reward that?" says Cosic, who recognized DeFreitas' talents and allowed her to rise within the ranks. She is now the organizational guru who holds the many departments of In2ition together.

Sola is newest to the team, arriving in 2010. She heads up In2ition's Western Canada division, travelling between Toronto and Saskatchewan. After working at a large ad agency for years, she was approached by Cosic, who knew Sola was used to long hours and travel. Cosic was intrigued by Sola's work across several industries, hoping to bring some of those ideas to real estate marketing.

"When I met with the team I was

impressed by these smart, powerful women," Sola said. "I came from a very corporate culture. It was interesting and inspiring to see a family-oriented business thriving and doing so well."

It doesn't hurt that Cosic offers financial rewards not often found in mid-level corporate environments.

Pezer-Lilic, director of design service, was also headhunted by Cosic. She had watched Pezer-Lilic for decades as she worked in Europe, designing everything from bowling alleys and shopping malls to eventually handling DKNY's expansion to Eastern Europe. "I always admired her success," Cosic said. When Pezer-Lilic was ready to return to Canada and start a family, Cosic made her an offer.

A woman with an impressive track record, like Pezer-Lilic, could work anywhere. How does Cosic manage and retain her talented staff?

"To Debbie's credit she doesn't micromanage us at all. We know our goals, we know our plans, and we know how to achieve them with Debbie's guidance," says Pezer-Lilic. "That's huge for me as a mom."

Cosic rewards hard work, leaving the "when" and "how" up to the individual. This leaves everyone free to do things the way they feel will be most effective.

"It's not just about the job. It's about quality of life," Cosic explained. With hours as long as these women put in, work flexibility and the respect and trust of your boss is key to avoid burnout and keep motivation high.

The motivation to reciprocate such trust is very powerful. A lack of trust can send a good woman packing. Liana Pronio, director of sales, offers us a perfect example.

No Glass Ceiling

Pronio was recommended to Cosic by a colleague for her organizational skills, ability to juggle multiple tasks, and her fearlessness. She is tough, and when a site is in trouble or a problem comes up, Pronio is the woman who gets things in order.

"Before this job I always worked in environments where I was the only female among many males," Pronio explained. "A lot of times it was very hard to get respect. That's how I got tougher. I had to fight for myself in a boy's club."

"I've had jobs where I hated the thought of getting up in the morning and going there. That was the norm for a lot of my career." She became used to being taken for granted and not being appreciated, knowing no matter how hard she tried she had her face against the glass ceiling. "It doesn't keep your morale up, that's for sure."

Fast forward to In2ition, where Pronio famously worked right up until a few hours before giving birth to her second child. She had her baby in the morning and was connecting with clients in the afternoon.

"She can juggle jobs, kids, and a husband flawlessly," says Cosic in clear admiration.

Pronio finds In2ition a stark contrast to life in the corporate world where taking a couple of hours to take a child to the dentist was a no-no, even at her level as a manager.

Clearly Pronio was delivering results for her employer. But what male bosses, or even female bosses in a male-dominated corporate culture, count as weakness, Cosic sees as strength.

Understanding and managing

many different environments and expectations is what real estate sales and marketing is all about.



Women are so multi-dimensional. You're expected to be a mother, a wife, and in this day and age a provider, a team member, an equal to your husband if not a superior in the work environment. A woman has to balance all that.



Realizing Potential

One of the hardest things about organizational sexism is that you're discouraged from working to your full potential, and you rarely receive a fair share of the rewards.

Cosic invests heavily in her staff, encouraging them to attend every industry event, conference, seminar, awards ceremony, or social function that can foster personal and professional growth.

And she pays better. Her sales agents get a base, which is unusual in an industry where it is often straight commission. A stable income ensures retention of talented staff. Senior staff can buy into a shared real estate investment fund.

Cosic keeps morale very high with a simple formula. "You raise your family, you have your job, and make some fun along the way, and make yourself a pile of money." Add to that a tremendous amount of hard work, and we can see the source of In2ition's success.

