

Women's History Month is a time for reflection, appreciation, and celebration of the many contributions women have made to change our lives for the better. The Illinois Office of Trade and Investment (OTI) is proud to celebrate International Women's Day on March 8th and to highlight several exemplary business leaders who have achieved international success. Their leadership and commitment have helped ensure continued economic growth in Illinois, supporting exports, jobs, and prosperity across the state.

Heather Acerra, Co-Founder of [Lux Blox](#)

Galesburg, IL

Lux Blox is a revolutionary STEM toy/tool created to teach engineering and design principles. Heather has an extensive background in training, human resources and benefits consulting and regularly volunteers in workforce and community development initiatives across the state.



"I would advise women working in international business to take advantage of the many resources the state of Illinois has to support them. The Illinois Department of Commerce regularly sponsors educational sessions on foreign markets and even sponsors trade missions to help make connections to support exports. There are also international trade specialists at small business development centers throughout the state. We have utilized resources at Bradley University to help us research as we have entered foreign markets."

Kenya Brooks-Jones, Co-Founder, President & CIO, [Jones Software Corp.](#)

Chicago, IL

Kenya Brooks-Jones is the President & CIO of Jones Software Corp. ([j-softech.com](#)). Launched in 2015, Jones Software Corp, has developed a cloud-based, learning management system (LMS), velocity learning and virtual classroom for primary, secondary and higher education, adult learners to close the learning gap.



"We as, successful women in international business have shared experiences and advice for aspiring women in the field. We emphasize the importance of building strong relationships, being assertive, learning about cultural differences, embracing challenges, networking, seeking out mentors, being adaptable, and taking care of oneself. We also highlight the opportunities and rewards of international business and acknowledge the challenges and barriers that we may face."

Karen Eng, President & CEO, [CSMI](#)

Schaumburg, IL

Karen is the President and CEO of CSMI, a privately held engineering firm specializing in the FDA & USDA regulated industries. Karen's career demonstrates her flexibility to work with small growing organizations to medium privately-owned companies to Fortune 100 corporations. Her close work with the Food Drug Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce, Minority Business Development Agency, the International Trade Administration, and the U.S. Export-Import Bank has led CSMI to be one of the top engineering consulting services firms in both domestic and foreign markets.



“For women business owners going international, I would utilize government resources such as Gold Key services and ISTEP funding to have experts offer advice and minimize expenses.”

Kathy Formella, Owner of [E. Formella & Sons, Inc.](#)

Oak Forest, IL

Formella is a woman-owned, global distributor of authentic Italian Specialties such as giardiniera, muffuletta, pasta sauce and infused oils, and is a fourth generation company which prides itself on being leading edge, providing quality products in an SQF (Safe Quality Food) facility. The international business degree has been instrumental in helping Formella tap into the export markets. Kathy started her career at Arthur Andersen/Accenture for the first 20 years upon graduation but moved to the family business to ensure the next generation can also share its family recipes, a labor of love.



“In the international market, it is a partnership and align yourself with customers that share that same core values.”

Elizabeth R. Gaffney, VP & General Counsel of [Goldman Products, Inc.](#)

Wauconda, IL

Elizabeth is the second generation in her family to lead Goldman, an industry game changer in manufacturing and servicing exquisite oral surgery and dental hygiene instruments. Under her leadership, Goldman continues its “Made in the USA” mission, focused on cementing her father’s legacy in the dental instrument market and committed to growing Goldman’s presence among practitioners worldwide. Prior to leading Goldman, Elizabeth was a successful corporate litigation attorney, who previously served in senior positions as a legislative affairs/policy advisor for several state agencies and two state constitutional officers.



“Know your audience, keep an open dialogue, and be fearless in your ownership of your business. This means do your homework, don’t be afraid to ask questions, and boldly advocate for your business. There are many voices that will share their views on how to do everything that you do in your business. However, at the end of every decision, it is your name and reputation that will be impacted, and only you can make the business decisions that allow you to preserve both.”

Tami Haroldsen, CFO of [Swimage](#)

Naperville, IL

Tami is co-founder and CFO of Swimage, a software company in Naperville. A CPA who holds a BS in accounting and MS in taxation, Tami has experience in public accounting, software industry finance, project management, financial planning, and MBA course instruction. She also has volunteered in various charitable organizations as a leader, teacher, treasurer, or auditor.



The Illinois Trade Mission to Japan in December 2022 was very fruitful for her business. Tami looks forward to her next trade mission.

“My advice for women working in international business is to learn the business customs of the countries and travel to meet with your contacts in person, if possible. In these days of virtual meetings, people feel

honored when you visit them. When you travel for those business meetings, stay a few extra days and have fun being a tourist!"

Judy La Marche, Chair of the Board of [La Marche Manufacturing](#)

Des Plaines, IL

Dr. La Marche has been employed for over thirty-five years at La Marche Mfg. She earned a PhD as a licensed clinical psychologist who practiced Neuropsychology in the department of Neurosurgery at University of Alabama Medical School in Birmingham. During her tenure there, she initiated a neuropsychological evaluation program contributing to the UAB heart transplant program. She was also the Director of the Southeastern Regional Head Injury program. Dr. La Marche graduated with an Executive MBA from the University of Alabama in 1997 and later served on the program's Advisory Board. She practiced as a Medical Consultant with the Social Security Administration until retiring in 2015, shifting focus as La Marche Mfg. became a Woman Owned Small Business. Judy has been active in the community, serving on boards and as an officer in local organizations and her church.



"My advice to any woman (or man) is to

- hone your strengths so you are prepared for any possibility;*
- be polite but persistent;*
- take care with your words;*
- support others whenever the opportunity arises."*

Ashley S. Moy, Chief Executive Officer, [Cast21](#)

Chicago, IL

Ashley S. Moy cofounded Cast21 after leading international, awarding-winning teams to develop medical devices and healthcare biologics. Ashley has been invited by government bodies, healthcare Fortune 500 companies, and globally-acclaimed publications to contribute to their forums, panels, and articles on healthcare and innovation around the world.



Her advice to others looking to enter the global marketplace: *"Don't be afraid of what you don't know and have the courage to ask for help. There are so many wonderful resources available for us to navigate through the incredible opportunities to conduct international business."*

Alexandra Pawlikowski, National Sales Director of [Howe Corporation](#)

Chicago, IL

Alex has extensive experience partnering with global clients in developing the best Original Equipment Manufacturer Refrigeration/Ice Equipment solutions. She immigrated from Poland when she was 12 years old and since then has been full speed ahead absorbing all she could about the culture, professional life. She is a strong member of her community, always helping other immigrant women by passing on her lessons learned. She developed a strong work ethic at Howe starting as a receptionist over two decades ago, including stints in the Admin, Accounting, Supply Chain, and Sales Departments. She is an invaluable member of the Executive Leadership Team at Howe Corporation.



"Treat all your customers as if they were your only customer!"

Lisa Victoria Waller, President and Co-Owner of [BDG International Inc.](#)

Elgin, IL

Lisa Victoria Waller (Anderson) is a President and co-owner of BDG International, Inc. located in Elgin, Illinois. BDG International, Inc was founded in 1983 by the Anderson family and is a full-service international freight forwarder, U.S. Customs Broker, and FTZ (Foreign Trade Zone) and Trade Consultant. Lisa is a Licensed Customs Broker and Certificated Export and Customs Specialist. Over the last 30 years Lisa has developed a unique FTZ consulting and administration program for U.S. and Foreign Direct Investment companies.



"Working in international trade is really open for all types of people and does not discriminate. Do not hold back thinking that there is not a type of business or region that does not welcome a woman in international trade. There are no boundaries if you are knowledgeable and a well-respected person in your field. International and local business etiquette is important to follow as well as ensuring you have good legal representation. International trade is exciting and offers the ability to grow personally and expand your business. Most importantly, if you are considering a region to promote or purchase your product overseas going in with a well-researched plan is the best."