



# Gender, Culture and Trade: Bridging the Gap in International Business

By Kayla Sutherland

*In 1998, Pernille Fischer Boulter left her home of Denmark and came to Canada with her husband. At the time, she had no idea she would venture into entrepreneurship, becoming the President and CEO of Kisserūp International Trade Roots Inc., a women owned and operated international consulting and trade training company.*

With offices in Halifax, Nova Scotia and Copenhagen, Denmark, the team at Kisserūp works with over 90 countries and 25 different sectors to provide small and medium-sized enterprises with the support needed to get involved in international trade. Kisserūp designs opportunities for mentorship, facilitates export workshops, forms and negotiates trade policy, conducts research and analysis, and promotes foreign investment flows. Pernille and her team work diligently to connect business leaders across the globe, taking their export development to the next level. They have successfully completed more than 45 deals in the span of 12 months.

“It is the most rewarding thing of all to see people succeed - making the connection to enable people to do what they want to do is exciting,” says Pernille.

In order to do this, Pernille works over 80 hours per week and travels more than 100 days a year to be onsite with her clients to implement strategies and provide training. A full workday usually ends as late as 10:00pm, which allows her to communicate with clients in different time zones. She considers Nova Scotia the perfect location for her field of work.

“It takes a lot of hours, and it is worth every hour of it,” says Pernille.



Photo by Sandor Fizi

The thing she values most about being a business owner is the ability to say no.

“We have a choice,” says Pernille. “We can choose which countries we feel we can work with, and avoid countries where we can’t. We cannot decide what proposals to win, but we can decide which to bid on, and which to say no to.”

Certain cultures can’t have open contact with unmarried women, making it important for Pernille and her staff to know where they stand in the culture they are working in. With Pernille’s line of work being international, culture is the dominant non-regulated factor for not having market access to a country, preventing her team from working with people to help them reach success.

According to several international business universities, 80 per cent of international business deals where the price is right for the supply, do not happen due to cultural misunderstandings, making cultural insight a make-or-break aspect of global business.

Throughout her travels, Pernille has noticed that culture impacts small things you might not expect, like the colours of threads in sewing kits. She discovered this on a business trip to Jamaica, when the hem of her skirt came down. She went to the hotel in need of a sewing kit to fix her skirt before her meeting and the colours were bright red, orange, green, and teal. She now collects the sewing kits everywhere she travels, noticing that the colour differences are drastic.

“This is purely driven by culture.”

Although she has found great success, she has also faced many obstacles, and is writing a book about it, expecting it to be out in June, sharing many things that worked, and things that didn't. The main challenge she struggled with was the difference between cultures. Having a masters in English, Pernille thought that she had a grasp on the English language until she came to Canada, realizing that just knowing the language was not enough.

“In my native language we don't have a word for please, so when I came here people thought I was bold, rude, or too direct,” says Pernille.

The same went for social interactions that involved opinions. In the Danish culture, if you don't like the food or someone's new haircut, it is more common to voice your honest opinion. However, in Nova Scotia, Pernille found the majority of people don't do that, and often find responses like that shocking. She realized quickly that knowing the norms of a culture is key if you want to network and submerge yourself in new groups

“You feel like it is your backyard, but people are telling you it's not your backyard.”

Pernille lives and works by the Victor Borge's words that, “the shortest distance between two people is a smile.”

“Nobody is fighting wars and laughing at the same time,” says Pernille. “Sometimes you need to laugh, it is only business.”

After Pernille was hit by a tractor-trailer in downtown Halifax nearly a year ago, working in a building with no elevator became a challenge; it was then that she fully realized the extent to which owning a business gives you the freedom to fit your work to your life. Pernille has the flexibility to work from any location, to take the time off when she needs it and to give her staff the same freedoms. As she gets older, she enjoys that she has the leeway to leave work to look after her parents, mentor and work as a volunteer, assured that at the end of the day, she and her team will pull through and deliver.

“There are lots of people in Canada and other countries that can't find work,” says Pernille, which makes entrepreneurship a great option, and with resources like the Centre for Women in Business, it is that much more attainable.

“The Centre for Women in Business has had a huge impact (on my business),” says Pernille.

She admits she did not start her business with a plan or initial idea; it was the result of being an immigrant to Canada and struggling to find employment with her background in IT. She didn't get involved with the Centre until Kisserūp was in the mature stage of business, and she now takes advantage of all that the Centre has to offer.

“It's like seeing something in colour for the first time,” says Pernille about the guidance she received from 'trailblazers' at the CWB, like Business Development Officer, Laurie Sinclair and long-time CWB Member, Faith Drinnan, founder of The Oyster Group and CWB Executive Director, Tanya Priske.

With International Women's Day approaching, Pernille reflects on previous events and is

amazed that the CWB can cater to a huge spectrum of businesses at once, and also be so inclusive. “Everyone who attends the events can take away something and apply it to their work no matter the stage or area of their business,” she says.

Kisserūp’s corporate membership to the CWB covers the personal and professional development of the staff. Pernille is confident in what the CWB has to offer and is continuously impressed by the CWB staff’s ability to fill the roles needed to provide support.

“We are no longer questioning if women are capable,” says Pernille. “CWB changed so much of this. It’s not about quotas, it’s about competency.”

**Centre for Women in Business**

Mount Saint Vincent University  
Suite 411 - McCain Centre - Halifax, NS - B3M 2J6  
902.457.6449 - 1.877.776.9022  
cwb@msvu.ca - [centreforwomeninbusiness.ca](http://centreforwomeninbusiness.ca)