

Amid political unrest, and riots in Turkey, the annual Dell Women's Entrepreneur Network (DWEN) conference went off without a hitch in Istanbul.

Canadians Marla Schwartz, president of Benecaid; Katherine Hague, ShopLocket founder; and Chandra Clarke founder and president of Scribendi attended.

Much of the three-day program centred on successful Turkish entrepreneurs, including Demet Mutlu, founder of Trendyol, who raised \$26-million in 2011 from global investment firms, including Silicon Valley's Kleiner Perkins Caufield Byers' first investment in Turkey.

As well, several Turkish investors and entrepreneurs highlighted the opportunities available for smaller international companies looking to do business in the country. They cited the country's status as the world's 16 largest economy, which is expected to be the second-fastest growing economy by 2018. In a population of more than 75 million, they noted that 62 million plus people own mobile phones and more than 35 million are Internet users.

Ingrid Vanderveldt, Dell's entrepreneur-in-residence, said Istanbul was the chosen venue in part because of its burgeoning business landscape. "It's growing very, very fast, there are a lot of opportunities here," she said. "We just wanted to be a part of that."

Canadian exports to Turkey totaled \$1.3-billion in 2011. For Canadian small businesses planning to expand to the country, the Canadian government offers a Canadian Trade Commissioner Service in Istanbul and Ankara. The biggest opportunities exist for companies in the defence and security, education, infrastructure, and building services industries, the government said.

Businesses of all sizes can also turn for help to the Canadian-Turkish Business Council (CTBC), which helps them connect with local contacts, find office space and develop a strategy for their expansion.

Toronto-based Scribendi, an online editing and proofreading marketplace founded in 1997, serves clients around the world. Turkey is one of its top 10 markets because of the number of people whose second language is English.

Ms. Clarke said the conference will help her hone in on that market and expand the company's presence here. "DWEN provided us with an opportunity to get to know the country much better and to see first hand what the people are like," she said, adding that at a lunch with the Canadian consulate she learned more about how to increase her company's local presence. "This kind of 'ground truth' information will help us expand further into Turkey," she said.

The main challenge, Ms. Clarke said her company is finding, is in reaching its potential customers from a Canadian base, something she'll be looking at as Scribendi grows. "Apart from the obvious uncertainty associated with political unrest, the trick for us is knowing how and where to reach our target clients. We need to learn more about the popular media outlets and how to craft our message for the local culture."

Ms. Hague of ShopLocket said her platform, which allows merchants to sell items and process purchases on their websites, could potentially expand to Turkey.

"We're an ecommerce platform and while we may have some sellers in Turkey using us, we haven't added any support for Turkish lira or actively pursued the market to date," Ms. Hague said. "After visiting Turkey and seeing how actively engaged their young population is online we may look at

extending support for the currency.”

Her biggest obstacle is that the site currently only supports English, so it would need to add Turkish support to truly build a large base of customers in the country. “Even if we supported the currency, we wouldn’t yet have language support and would remain less than an ideal solution for sellers in the country. Multi-language support would require a large investment we are not ready to make,” Ms. Hague said.

Benecaid’s Ms. Schwartz said her company, which helps entrepreneurs offer health benefits to their employees, doesn’t have expansion outside Canada on its radar yet.

Aside from the recent security challenges, which cancelled a trip to the Grand Bazaar, Ms. Vanderveldt said doing business in Turkey has some pronounced challenges for female entrepreneurs. “Probably the biggest difference about doing business here vs. in the U.S.,” she says, “is in the U.S., women doing business is almost this expected thing, and I think in Turkey it’s very much still an emerging thing, so there’s a lot of excitement around it, there’s a lot of encouragement.”

Not every Canadian small business has the ability or scope to expand to Turkey, but the country’s population and economic growth make it a viable place for those with the right product and tolerance for risk to expand.

The riots in Taksim Square showing signs of that the political climate could be a deterrent.