

Sonya Jain

Another Door Opens

When enough doors had slammed in Sonya Jain's face, she decided to take the back way in.

Ever since earning her MBA from the University of Massachusetts, she had been told by countless potential employers that despite her impressive qualifications, they would not even give her an interview until she had attained her Green Card.

In the past, she had done as she was told and looked for work elsewhere, but as she was turned away at the front door of a job fair in Tysons Corner, Virginia, she realized she had had enough. "I was told that without my Green Card, I wasn't even allowed to enter the fair," she explains. "I started walking away when I noticed a woman leaving the building from a side door, so I used that door to enter the fair instead."

When one door closes, another door opens, and sometimes more than one. Because she didn't take no for an answer that time, Sonya was able to actually land a job with a consulting firm at the fair. "They didn't even ask about my Green Card. Since I still had a valid Student's Visa that allowed me one year of work experience, I didn't bring it up either," she explains. "They didn't ask any questions, and I didn't bring it up until six months later, when I had really shown them what I was capable of. Once I had proven myself, I told my boss I needed him to sponsor me."

With the help of her employer, she was able to finally attain her work permit, and has since opened door after door for herself, working her way up in the world of consulting so that today, she is the founder, President, and CEO of eGlobalTech, a management consulting firm that works the gamut from enterprise architecture to business and IT consulting and cyber security

services, with a focus on government contracting. "About 95 percent of our contracts are direct with the government," she explains. "Most small companies grow as subcontractors, but I like us to have control, so I was lucky to have started my business in a field where I was already well known and could win my own contracts."

Before starting eGlobalTech in 2004, Sonya had worked at Booz Allen Hamilton for twelve years, at which point she found herself at a crossroads. "Booz Allen was a great company to work for, with great people and clients, but there is always an element of bureaucracy in a company that big, and I felt it was inhibiting me from doing everything I wanted to do with my career," she explains. She entertained the idea of trying something new for several years but didn't take action until, unfortunately, a health issue forced her to cut back at work. "I had been wondering if I could handle starting my own thing for a while,

and the illness showed me I had to get out of there and do something different," she recalls. "I had been comfortable at Booz Allen, so I could have continued working at a frantic pace, but my health caused me to take a step back."

In 2004, she officially left Booz Allen. In a twist of fate, a federal client she had known for several years from the Department of Labor approached her to be a project manager on a large contract, which allowed her to start her company with a project already underway. Her first hire was a smart young executive from PwC, who now serves as her Senior Vice President, and together they grew the company to its current size of 200 employees.

When Sonya started eGlobalTech in 2004, she focused on building the company around her own core values, which she felt had been missing in her previous career endeavors. "I read the book



FISH! by Stephen C. Lundin, Harry Paul, and Jon Christensen around the time I was leaving Booz and envisioning my own company,” she explains. “In short, it discusses how the Pike Place Fish Market in Seattle has such happy workers because they focus on being present, having fun, having the right attitude, and making someone’s day. It really clicked with me, and I found I really wanted to start my company with that idea of knowing the people you work with and creating a family-like culture within the work environment.”

It comes as no surprise that Sonya wanted to build a family-like company, since family has always been her top priority. She was born in India to her mother, a homemaker, and her father, who served in the Indian Army. Like most military families, they moved to a new city every three years, which taught Sonya early on how to adapt to any situation. “Moving around was wonderful in that we got to meet so many people and see so many places, but it had its drawbacks too,” she recalls. “It always took a while to make new friends, and each school studied different material at different times, so sometimes I’d repeat a subject, and other times I would completely miss one.” In order to stay on top of her studies, Sonya had to work twice as hard just to ensure she was on the same page as the rest of the class. “Between catching up in school and making a spot on the sports team, there were a lot of challenges, but I made a point to get over them, and I think that’s influenced my business today,” she says. “There are challenges every day, but you have to spend your time finding ways to overcome them.”

While Sonya is competitive in almost every aspect of her life now, she needed a little prompting as a child. Up until fifth grade, she had been a mediocre student, succumbing to the struggles of the constant relocating. “I really wanted a new watch, but my Dad said he would only get it for me when I came first in my class,” she smiles. “He told me he knew I could do it, and I wanted that watch badly enough, so I worked until I came in first. After that, I realized I liked that feeling so much that I always had to keep doing it, in whatever I did.”

Her father, who had been wise enough to ignite her competitive edge, has always played an instrumental role in Sonya’s life. “He never forced anything on my sister and I, but he would sit with us and talk it out, discussing every pro and con until we felt good about a decision,” she says.

While Sonya worked hard at school, she rarely thought about what she wanted to be when she grew up. Ironically, the gaping disparity between India’s rich and rampant poverty led Sonya to decide as a child that she did not want to be a businessperson. She also knew, however, that she wanted to do something different from what most women did at that time. “We lived in the upper middle class with strong military influence, which had adapted some of the Western mentality of women’s equality,” she says. “This was not true all over India, however. In most places, girls’ education was not a high priority, but my father was adamant about putting my sister and I in the best schools in whatever city we were in. He wanted us to have the best education and a couple of years of experience so that, if something happened in our lives, we could stand on our own two feet. After that, he was supportive of us getting careers or staying home to take care of a family, as long as we were prepared for any challenge or opportunity.”

Sonya spent the last two years of high school at a boarding school, since her father had left the Army and begun work in the private sector. After graduating, she attended the Indian Institute of Technology to pursue a degree in Engineering. “In India, if you were a woman and decided to have a career back then, your main options were to become a teacher or a doctor,” she says. “I chose engineering because I wanted to do something not many other women had done.”

After graduating, she got a job in India in the field of sIT for a company in hopes to live near her parents; unfortunately, however, the office she was supposed to work in closed, so in order to stay with the company, she would have to move to the United States. “All of my friends had applied to move to the US, but I didn’t want to leave India,” she confesses. “But my father urged me to go, so I agreed to, under the condition that my parents visit so we could tour the country together.”

With the agreement in mind, Sonya moved to the US and worked for a year, during which time she was accepted with a full-ride scholarship to the University of Massachusetts at Amherst to pursue her MBA. “I told myself that the day after I graduated, I would go back to India because the luxuries are so vast here compared to the rest of the world, and I knew I would never want to leave otherwise,” she remarks. Staying true to her plan, she bought a ticket back to India in advance for the

day after graduation. She never made the plane, however, because during an internship in Washington, D.C. with World Bank, she met her husband. The two were married in August of 1989, just months after she graduated, and rather than returning home to India, she relocated to Washington.

After attaining her Green Card, she continued working with the small company for two years, until it was unfortunately shut down. Although she worked as an independent contractor for several months to finish up projects for previous clients, she had no trouble finding a job the second time around. With her Green Card in hand, she landed seven job offers within a few short weeks, from which she decided to join Booz Allen.

After twelve years with Booz, her transition towards eGlobalTech was seamless. "I chose to build a management consulting firm because that's what I really knew," she says. "I like working directly with clients and doing things that make them successful. It's all about coming up with ideas, solutions, and ways to solve problems for my clients."

Despite the recession, the company has continued to grow at an impressive rate, thanks not only to Sonya's willingness to face adverse times head on, but also to her dedication to her family of employees. "I try to take care of the people who work for my company," she says. "Communication is key; I have a vision, and I can see when something isn't working, so I'm able to guide them and show them when it's time to take things to the next level."

Although Sonya places a heavy focus on caring for her company and employees, she still makes sure to put her family first. Several times throughout her career, she willingly backed off to part time in order to spend more time with her daughters, one of whom is now in college, while the other is a senior in high school. "It's hard to find time to do much else between work and my family," she laughs. Her husband now works as the CFO for eGlobalTech, and his skill set serves as the perfect balance to hers, both at work and at home. "He's more cautious than I am," she explains. "I could spend money on anything, and he stops me. I do whatever I feel is right, and he reigns me in when it's appropriate. He's very detail oriented, while I'm more of a big picture person, so it's a good combination."

When the two are not focusing on eGlobalTech or their daughters, they make an effort to give back to their community in whatever way they can. Because of her military background, Sonya has regularly helped out with such charities as Operation Covert Santa, which provides Christmas gifts for families of wounded soldiers. Additionally, Sonya has donated both personally and through the company to ASHA, a charity for battered Asian women in America, as well as Girls Learn International, which helps promote education and equal rights to women in underprivileged countries.

On a personal level, however, Sonya differentiates herself from others as a leader who is always willing to help, whether it's offering advice or simply listening. "I'm always sitting down with my employees, clients, or friends to talk out whatever problem may be on their mind, whether it's work-related or personal," she explains. "I want to share my experiences and connect with people in a genuine way."

In advising young people entering the workforce today, Sonya emphasizes the importance of learning. "It is so amazing to me that there is so much to learn from every different person and event and situation," she says. "I don't think that you can ever know everything, so just learn and be humble, because if you are humble, you can take in so much more." By staying engaged, open-minded, and willing to learn, you make sure you aren't just waiting for the doors to the future to open for you – rather, you open those doors yourself.

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