

# Kay Sears

## The Game Changer

When Kay Sears graduated from the University of Richmond and returned home in Northern Virginia, she started to see her grandmother through new eyes. Kay would pick her up and take her to church. Afterward, the women, young and old, would go to the grocery store together, and then back to her grandmother's house to talk. "I began asking her about her career, and as I learned more and more about it, I was amazed," Kay remembers.

Despite growing up in the 1930s and 40s, Kay's grandmother went to college and became the regional Vice President for Stanley Home Products, where she managed hundreds of men through the 40s and 50s. While her husband had been very supportive, she certainly faced outside pressure and harassment, but she talked to her granddaughter about why she did those things and how rewarding they were.

"Hearing about her success really inspired me to be successful," Kay affirms. "I realized that, if she could do that in the 40s and 50s, I had no excuse not to go full steam ahead toward what I wanted to do. She worked out of the home, breaking all these social norms that were gone by the time I entered the workforce, and she told me not to let anything slow me down." Now the President of Intelsat General Corporation (IGC), a subsidiary of Intelsat, Kay is breaking social norms of her own as she redefines what it means to be a game changer in the world today.

Though Title 9 and women's issues in the workplace were a hot debate when Kay entered the workforce, she actually feels that her professional career hasn't been thwarted by a glass ceiling. Rather, the help and support of mentors along the way was a key element of her success. "When I get into a company, I just want to put 110 percent into it, so the concept of changing jobs was very hard for me," she reflects. "My first job was

with the government, and I'd probably still be there today if a friend of mine hadn't helped me see that you have to change jobs to make big jumps in your career. The game changing advice I received was, when you stop learning, it's time to leave. That remains my check today: am I still learning something? Am I learning from my team, from the industry trends, from my challenges?"

Fortunately, at a company like IGC, the learning never stops. Its parent company, Intelsat, was launched in 1964 by the Kennedy Administration to provide critical telephone communications between the U.S., Russia, and other countries. It has since gone through many iterations and privatization, and while the military was always part of its customer base, but didn't warrant its own division until 1999 when, in the wake of the Gulf War, the reliance of the U.S. military and its allies on commercial operators became more critical. The government's capability in the arena was lacking, with considerable gaps in infrastructure in areas like the Middle East, so they were very dependent on satellite communications. Because Intelsat had a global mission and the necessary bandwidth, the U.S. government and its allies became increasingly reliant on it.

Thus, Intelsat formed IGC around that relationship and its unique challenges, including the unique kinds of contracting, its different sets of requirements, and its need for classified discussions. As IGC grew, it gained a more nuanced understanding of the government customer and began asking what else it could do for them, allowing it to grow into a full-fledged company with its own sales and marketing, engineering, operations, finance, and accounting departments, all geared at providing the commercial infrastructure necessary for the military to carry out its mission.

Today, Kay is passionate about leading



IGC because of the subject matter itself. “I’ve been attracted to the technology from the moment I left college and first found out what a satellite was,” she says. “There was something about space—the fact that we build these satellites on the ground, put instruments on them, launch them into space, and can’t touch them anymore. They have to continue to work well and reliably, even though we can’t see them anymore, and there’s an intangibility to that that intrigues me.”

Beyond this fascination, Kay is driven by the clientele IGC serves—soldiers. “These are amazing, dedicated people defending our country,” she says. “We contribute in a small way to their ability to complete the mission for national security, or to connect to their loved ones through satellite communications, and that’s very powerful for me.”

Kay’s own father was in the Air Force, and having grown up amongst people in uniform, the opportunity to serve them is personal. “I loved the fact that my dad was in the military,” she gushes. “He retired as a colonel. We’d walk on base and people would salute him, and I thought that was so neat.” She was born in Arkansas, but the family moved to Texas, Taiwan, Northern Virginia, and Alabama, before her father retired and they settled in Northern Virginia when Kay was in seventh grade.

While difficult at first, Kay soon learned how to cope with the frequent moving, and even came to celebrate it. “It wasn’t that I didn’t get attached; it’s just that I got better at making friends when I got to a new place,” she recalls. “I got to see a lot of different places, and I think it builds a resiliency that can prepare you for other things in life. I still make friends easily and have the confidence to go off and do things on my own, and I have no problem walking into a room of strangers at an industry event or a conference.”

What’s more, the frequent moves were a bonding experience for Kay and her older brother. Tragically, her oldest brother died of spinal meningitis when Kay was eight. “That incident really brought our family together, especially my remaining brother and I,” Kay explains. That culture of closeness continued as the family moved from place to place, and the siblings realized that, while other things come and go, their bond persisted. “He’s not just my brother, but one of my best friends today,” she affirms.

Once the family settled down in Northern

Virginia, Kay’s father became deputy comptroller of the Smithsonian, and her mother continued her work as a real estate agent. “From my dad, I learned leadership skills in the work environment, and from my mom, I learned leadership skills in projects, as well as how to be a good friend, a supportive family member, and how to balance the things you want to do with the things you need to take care of,” she remembers. In addition to working jobs at donut shops, in restaurants, and at the beach through high school, Kay developed a big group of tight-knit friends in high school. “I was always the organizer,” she laughs. “My friends would say I was terribly bossy, but I got things done and helped people coalesce around a consensus. I was maybe a bit more of a risk taker than most of my friends as well.”

This willingness to take risks soon helped Kay to make a character-defining decision that would change the rest of her life. It was college decision time, and her group of friends all decided to go together to two different schools. Kay had been accepted to both, but in the end, she decided on neither. Instead, she chose to branch off and attend the University of Richmond, where she knew nobody. “Though I made that decision consciously, I don’t think I knew why I was choosing to do it at the time,” she remembers. “But I was driven. I felt at that point in time that I needed to do something on my own for the first time. It reaffirmed the sense of independence I had gained growing up, and it helped me become more serious and focus on what I needed to accomplish in college.”

Even Kay’s social life became more serious. The school had no sororities on campus, so she joined the lobbying effort to change that, and once those efforts paid off during her junior year, she immediately assumed a leadership role in the transition. Kay became the first chapter president of her sorority, charting new territory and putting her organizational skills to the test. “It was tough because nobody knew what they were doing,” she says. “I had to run the meetings, and I had to run rush for the next year. It was a challenging but extremely rewarding opportunity.”

Academically, Kay started her studies in general liberal arts but quickly became interested in business and marketing, completing her last two years in the business school. As she took her courses, she dreamed of becoming an advertising

mogul in New York City. "I'd look at all the cool advertisements that were coming out for great products at the time, and I thought that's what I wanted to do," she recalls.

Excited for her future career, Kay visited the office of career planning and placement early in her senior year, where students could sign up for interviews with various companies. She wanted to do some practice interviews, so she signed up for a number of slots at random. One of them happened to be an interview for a job as an auditor for major systems acquisitions at the Department of Commerce—something Kay knew absolutely nothing about. "I'll never forget sitting down for that interview with Karl Schornagel," she says. He explained to her that the Department of Commerce houses the National Weather Service and the National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration, so they purchase an array of satellite, communication, and sensor systems to collect weather and oceanographic data.

"He described this whole network of weather and ocean data, and I found myself completely riveted," she remembers. "I would be working with the Inspector General to make sure those systems were being acquired correctly. I remember walking out of that interview and saying, 'That sounds really cool!' I started thinking about the technology, and all the ways society was using that data."

Kay was given a second interview, in which she learned more about the job, and something just clicked. She had had other interviews and offers by then, but she knew it was what she wanted to do. "I took it and loved it!" she says. "I could never have guessed I'd end up doing that, but something about the technology really appealed to me, and the whole advertising thing just flew out of my head. I was put on one of the big satellite programs, and the guy I worked under was very technical and a great teacher. The Commerce Department had had significant delays and cost overruns, and we were working to right the systems. I had the sense of doing something very valuable."

At the same time, Kay took night classes at George Washington University to earn her MBA. She stayed there for almost four years, until in 1991, a former coworker who had taken a job at Comsat convinced her that communication satellites in the private sector were worth learning about. With that, she was hired into product

development at Comsat. It was a bit technical for her taste, but thanks to advice from a mentor, she quickly moved into account management, where she could support customers, write proposals, and focus on sales and business development.

"I started in video broadcast and got to know all the broadcasters with high operational requirements," she says. "They were very demanding customers—there could be no down time, and their satellite had to work perfectly, so it was a rapid induction into the operations side. I then moved over to the military and government, where the stakes were even higher. If our satellites failed, people could lose their lives, not just their advertising revenue."

Staying on the sales and marketing side of the industry, Kay advanced from account manager to account director and then broadened the number and breadth of accounts she worked with. When she had her first child, she left Comsat to work as a consultant in the satellite field for a few years before joining a friend at a company called ATC Teleports. When it was purchased by Verastar, Kay accepted a position at PanAmSat in 2004, which merged with Intelsat in 2006. "Through that progression, the government customer became more important, and I felt an affiliation to go try to formulate special products and services around that customer," Kay reflects. "So that became my area of expertise."

Kay was a Senior VP at PanAmSat at the time of the merger and was picked to lead the sales and marketing division. Someone else was picked to be President, but when that individual left due to medical reasons in 2007, Kay thought it was her chance. They interviewed her in 2007 but chose someone from the outside instead. "I was disappointed, but at the same time, I was a little relieved," she says. "He came from the intelligence side of the business, and I learned a lot from him. I also needed to finish up some contracts we were trying to win and proposals we were writing, and I felt I couldn't move on until I accomplished those things."

After a year, however, the President decided to move on, so Kay raised her hand and said it was her time. She knew the market, and while she was sales and marketing oriented, she had learned the finance, investment, engineering, and operations sides as well. Her dedication, commitment, and loyalty were renowned, and she was given the opportunity to put her skills to the

test when she was named President in 2008.

"That was the first time I had actually asked for the job like that, and I'm so glad I did," Kay says. "To serve the general manager function, where you have your hand in each part of the business, has been very exciting. I love looking for solutions, and when you move up in leadership, you realize you don't have to be an expert in everything because you have a team behind you. With that in mind, I fluctuate between a consultative and directive style of leadership, depending on the area, person, and skill set I'm working with. My job is to set the vision of the company. I have to understand all of our initiatives, but I don't have to own them all. I support others in owning them and put them in the context of where we're trying to go as a company. And I love to foster collaboration in our workforce, encouraging our people to understand and think strategically."

Since joining IGC, Kay has worked tirelessly to promote the public private partnership at the heart of its mission. Playing a complementary yet critical role to the government's infrastructure, IGC continues to find new and vital ways to support the government's architecture in space and aims to secure its legacy as an essential component in this architecture.

In reflecting on her own legacy, Kay is thankful for the mentors that played a critical role in her advancement. "I've had some really wonderful bosses, I have to say," she remarks. "I've had wonderful mentors who believed in me and pushed me more than I pushed myself to expand and take on additional roles. People saw things in me and asked me to go for it, and I was lucky to have bosses who took the time to say, 'What is Kay's next step?'" In paying the gift forward, Kay makes a point today to mentor young women at IGC and is also part of an organization called Women in Aerospace, which gives her the opportunity to provide career guidance on a broader scale.

"It's not just about support at work, though," Kay affirms. "Could I have done what I do and be where I am today without my husband's support? No way. Nathaniel has always encouraged me to take challenges and to go for it. He's been rock solid." When Kay and Nathaniel's two children had gotten old enough that it was clear they would benefit from a parent at home, the Sears sat down together and looked at their

careers. Objectively, Kay's was on a more promising track, so Nathaniel volunteered to stay home. "I would never have become President if he hadn't done that," she says. "We make decisions together as a team and are a better family because of that."

One of the many ways this manifests itself is through the Sears family's philosophy of giving back. They've set up a family fund, and they decide together as a family where they want to make charitable donations. "We're trying to show our kids that giving back is one of the most rewarding parts of life," she affirms. It also manifests itself in a supportive spirit that allows each family member to take risks and try new things, like when Kay's daughter, at the age of five, asked her mother to try kicking the soccer ball around with her. Kay had never played soccer before, but it became a true passion for her and remains so today, long after her daughter dropped the sport. "My team has been playing together competitively for over a decade now, and they're some of my best friends," she says. "And it's led me to learn a lot about myself and the fact that one can pick up something later in life that becomes so meaningful. My counterbalance at the end of a really hard day at work is a really great competitive soccer game at night."

Kay's story, from satellites to soccer, is a testament to the importance of a lifelong willingness to learn, and she would advise this willingness to any young person entering the business world today. "Starting with your first job, the desire to learn has got to exceed the desire to succeed," she says. "You have to know what you don't know. If you only have a desire to succeed, you're going to have a narrow idea of what success is. Don't let yourself get narrowly defined; focus on your desire to learn."

Beyond that, she emphasizes the importance of critical thinking, math, and science skills. "I would advise getting a technical base for what you're doing by tackling the engineering understanding first," she says. "Then build the business and marketing skills on top of that. America is really losing its math and science expertise. We need more young people to have that as a base and to use it in their critical thinking process so we can continue to innovate, manufacture, and create things in this country. Once you have that math and science basis, you can become anything." Just like Kay and her

grandmother before her, its those who are committed to lifelong learning and who aim to set trends instead of follow them that prove to be the most powerful game changers.

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– **By Gordon J. Bernhardt, CPA, PFS, CFP®, AIF®**

*About Gordon J. Bernhardt  
President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth*

*Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit [www.BernhardtWealth.com](http://www.BernhardtWealth.com) and [Gordon's Blog](#).*

