

Sam Zamani

Space to Dream

Sam Zamani first set foot on an airplane at the age of 18. Eight thousand miles later, he stepped off in America. Now, alone in a foreign country, Sam had space to dream—and a lot to learn. “I could write in English and I had great diction, but I couldn’t put sentences together to save my life,” he laughs today. “I found out later, it was because I was speaking in English but not thinking in English. I had six weeks before I started college at the University of Maryland, so my teacher told me to watch American soap operas.”

Sam had always been a dreamer, and in America, those dreams began translating into reality. Ever since the earliest days of his childhood, he had been madly in love with outer space, and he’d watch any space-related movie or TV show he could find. He dreamed of boarding a spaceship someday, jetting high up above the atmosphere to take a look at Earth from a new vantage point.

It wasn’t very long afterward that Sam found himself working for NASA, reporting to one of the three original designers of the Apollo 7 mission. “I was working alongside world-renowned scientists who had meteors and stars named after them,” Sam marvels. “In a sense, I had made it to space already.” Now the founder and President of IMCI Technologies (IMCI), a critical infrastructure protection company, Sam parlays the same positive, adventurous, defiant spirit into a resilient company with a warm culture and exceptional products. Indeed, in his 57 years of life, he’s never seen the glass as half empty, and in a sense, optimism has been his guiding light. “If someone brings me a problem, I know there’s an answer to be found,” he says. “There’s nothing we can’t solve if we put our heads together.”

Launched in 1992, IMCI has redefined itself three separate times over the years, escalating

to a height of over 200 employees as a services company before transforming into a smaller team as the product company it is today. Regardless of its size, Sam has always known each employee personally, and thinks of his team as a small family full of self-starters who look out for one another. At the end of a long day, software developers will head over to help out at the manufacturing division if they know there’s extra work to be done, and a sense of camaraderie and caring permeates the culture.



Today, the company’s technology covers facility equipment, sensors, meters, and network elements that can be accessed and remotely managed from anywhere. An industry leader in remote monitoring, management, and control solutions, IMCI serves clients across a variety of sectors and industries, including Fortune 500 companies, government entities, telecommunications, utility companies, public safety organizations, building management firms, and broadcasting entities across the U.S., Canada, South America, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. IMCI has worked with European Department of Defense organizations, and has played a pivotal role in the public safety networks at the city and state levels. “Our flagship Open-i product has been implemented as a critical part of physical infrastructure protection for major US and European telecom carriers, and for transportation administration,” Sam explains. “As well, power and utility companies in the US, Europe, and the Middle East rely on Open-i and the IMCI suite of monitoring and analytics software products to provide constant monitoring, configuration, control, and management of their physical devices and network elements.”

In many ways, IMCI’s enduring spirit and global footprint mirror Sam’s own rich history. His family was literally forged in flames, as his father

survived a terrible fire that left him hospitalized for four years during his engagement to Sam's mother. Someone had given him the wrong kind of fuel for the heaters used in the tailor shop where he worked, and when he was pulled from the building, he had third-degree burns covering 90 percent of his body. But his fiancé stood by his side through the 21 surgeries it took to restore him to health, and the two were finally married. "My mother was willing to sacrifice everything for our family," Sam recalls. "Her father was killed when she was young, and she was pulled out of school, which broke her heart. But she was incredibly dedicated to us, making sure our home was full of love."

Sam's father worked as a tailor and then an accountant for a major university, while his mother was a homemaker. He had an older sister, a younger sister, and a younger brother, and he remembers the tremendous sacrifices his father made for the kids. "I remember him waking us up at 6:00 AM with fresh bread he had just bought at the bakery, water boiling for hot tea, and butter on the table," Sam says. "He was loyal, dedicated, and honest to a fault. He never engaged in anything that wasn't completely ethical and principled. He loved his garden, and in a culture where most men want women to wait on them, he always worked shoulder-to-shoulder with my mom. People loved him, and I took a lot of my work ethic from him."

Sam was also told that he was the special kid. Gifted with a near photographic memory and an affinity for math, he could do complex multiplications in his head by the age of eight. He was always top of his class in school, but was an incessant troublemaker. "I spent a lot of time in the principal's office," he laughs. "I also didn't think there was anything special about the fact that I was smart, or that I could memorize anything. For me, there was no honor in being born with a gift. What mattered was what you did with it."

Though he was always in trouble, the principal loved Sam and recognized his potential. He was a regional chess champion and a strong soccer player, and always had the benefit of the Principal's support.

In America, far away from his family for the first time, Sam kept his father's words close. "My dad impressed upon me the importance of always living below your means," Sam says. "He taught me it was better to go to bed hungry than to borrow money." His first four years in America

were spent attending the University of Maryland, where most of his friends had already gotten credit cards by the start of their junior year. Sam, however, paid for everything in cash. "If I needed something and the money was there, I'd spend it," he recalls. "If it wasn't there, I did without. Learning how to manage my finances while living in a foreign land was a defining life skill, and to this day, I'm very intentional about how I spend my money. It goes toward my kids and grandkids, extended family, friends, colleagues, or charity — not toward extravagances or material impulses."

Sam's father sent him money each semester, so long as he was provided an original transcript for that semester. And though he was working to support Sam's mother and three siblings, he still found a way to send \$500 each month. But after the first two semesters, Sam decided to send a copy of his transcript instead of the original. "It was my way of telling him I didn't want to take his money, and that I could support myself," he explains. "He was angry when he found out I was washing dishes at a restaurant to earn it, because he wanted me to have a better life than he had had. I reminded him that he had already given me that life by getting me to America and supporting me as I got settled, and now I was good. I told him I'd let him know if I got into trouble. It was a defining moment for me, being completely independent in a strange country when I wasn't even twenty years old yet."

Sam's friend sold him his 1974 Malibu for \$400 so he had a way to get to work. His friend drove an Impala, and every weekend, Sam and Mo could be found working on their cars side-by-side, trying to get them working again for the week ahead. In 1983, he bought a Toyota Celica GT, the dream car he drove for the next 180,000 miles worth of adventures. He later passed the car to his wife, who drove it for 18 months, and then his daughter, who drove it for 20 months, before passing it to his niece, who drove it for another two years. Sam then took it back and drove it a while more before donating it so it could touch more lives. "It taught me a lesson I always tell my daughter, which is that if you value something and take care of it, it will take care of you," he says.

Building a life for himself in college, Sam was empowered with the sense that he could do anything he put his mind to. He spent two years tutoring at University of Maryland and pursued his passion for soccer, even earning an invitation

for semi-pro tryouts. Six weeks before the tryouts, he blew out his left knee—a defining moment that diverted his course from the life he certainly would have chosen otherwise. Also around that time, Sam's roommate was visited by his sister, Mishi, who had just recently moved to America. On their first date, Sam told Mishi he would marry her, and though it took him four years to convince her, she finally said yes.

Sam had done some summer teaching in college, and when he graduated in 1983, he taught at a programming school in Silver Spring for several months while working for a company called Data Systems Analyst. "I was having a ball, but in a meeting one day, my manager told me I needed to learn to perform more like another colleague," Sam recalls. "His tone really rubbed me the wrong way, and I immediately handed in my resignation letter. I have high standards when it comes to treating people with respect, and will not tolerate a workplace where people are anything less than supportive."

Sam then landed a job at CSC, where he was stationed at Goddard Space Center working on a weather satellite taking real time operational measurements. He loved the work but was discouraged by a lack of opportunity to advance, so he instead took a job at MCI. He had been there for just under a month when he was asked to move to MCI's Texas office to take on a job that two other hires before him had failed to complete. He gave up his apartment and took a hiatus from his graduate studies to relocate, only to be let go three weeks later due to a hiring freeze.

Sam took a job in DC, writing code for a company that found large certificates of deposit for high net worth individuals. And every night, he'd come home to a voicemail message from the Director of MCI, apologizing for the hiring mistake. MCI offered to cover the tuition for the coursework Sam had skipped out on to take the job, and after three months, the director made him an offer that would change the course of his life. "I told him I wanted to move out of testing and into development, so he offered me a job on their intelligent network platform," Sam recounts. "There were only two companies on the planet doing that kind of work, so I returned to MCI and delivered the biggest project of my life."

Thanks to Sam's leadership, the intelligent network project was completed on time and on budget. One of his team members was then

scheduled to take a two-week vacation, and when the director told Sam that the employee couldn't take the time off, Sam aggressively handed in his resignation. The VP tried to stop him, offering everything short of firing the director, but Sam would accept nothing less. "My people put their hearts and souls into completing that project with excellence," he recounts. "I couldn't stand by and allow the director's disrespect."

Sam went on to do Unix development for the company that managed the stock market ticker, and had been there for six months when a former mentor at MCI called and asked him to return. Sam was fond of the guy, so he accepted and was placed at the Pentagon City office, overseeing a team of 28. Fourteen months later, when his mentor moved on to a new company, Sam decided to move on as well. After MCI, at the age of 33, Sam transitioned to UTA and became the key person on a job for army housing. In that capacity, he worked closely with a colonel and the program management office on base, and he confidently laid out his terms. He insisted that he be free to operate as he saw fit, outside the typical bureaucratic structures of the organization. "I told them that if they gave me an impossible job and needed it done in 24 hours, I'd do it in 18, as long as I didn't have to worry about rules and regulations bogging me down," he recalls. "I had a system to develop and run."

Sam had several months left on that project when he received a call from his mentor in 1992, asking for his help on a large contract in Canada. Sam agreed, and he decided to brand his company as International Management Consulting, Inc., or IMCI. He spent a year in Canada building a telecommunications company from scratch, and then spent eight months in the UK doing the same thing. "I was this lucky kid who had built an IN (Intelligent Network) platform, which had given me experience in all aspects of telecommunications including sales, marketing, billing, provisioning, and fraud control," he says.

IMCI opened a small office and then a software division, followed soon by other divisions and ultimately their remote facility management product. By 1999, they had grown substantially, opting to build their own network operation center and call center. With the telecom bust of 2001, however, the company was forced to constrict substantially. "That was an incredibly trying time

because I always put people first in business, but I ultimately had to lay a lot of people off," he reflects. "My management team and I cut our salaries to zero, but in the end, we still had to go through with the layoffs. But at least our people saw how hard we tried to prevent it, and that mattered to them."

Fortunately, IMCI was able to stabilize itself through the downturn and later took strides to reduce its offerings to the three core divisions of product, software, and tech support. Today, it is focused almost exclusively on its product and the few services associated with it, like deployment, training, a technical support. "Our product allows companies to improve the productivity of their people, maintain complete 24/7 situational awareness of their business, monitor their energy consumption, and enjoy complete independence from any vendor," Sam explains.

Through it all, Sam has been grateful for the love and patience of his wife, Mishi. "Nobody else could have put up with me the way she did," he reflects. "We're very different in a lot of ways, but she's a great partner. There have been so many ups and downs, and she's always gone well beyond the call of duty as a wife and soulmate." He's also incredibly grateful to the country that took him in when he was eighteen, and has been home ever since. "In America, we have the ability to do things in our democracy that the rest of the world cannot do," he says. "It's an amazing gift that most people don't understand. Here, people affect change through the political process instead of killing each other. It's a process that makes America the best country on the planet. We have this amazing, awesome gift of true freedom, and I'm so grateful to my father for all he sacrificed to get me here."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Sam says not to be afraid of anything life throws at you. "There are things in

life you can control, and things you can't," he says. "Learn to live with the things you can't control, and don't dwell on them. Know that every problem has a solution. And as I tell my daughter, never stop dreaming. 99 percent of the time, I use my imagination to dream of where I want to be in two days, two months, or two years. In order to set your sights on something, you first have to see it, and to see it, you have to dream it."

Beyond that, Sam maintains an unshakable faith in his own insights and experience, to the point that Mishi often likens him to Galileo. "My number one principle is, I don't worry about how many people tell me I'm wrong," he says. "Quantity does not tell right or wrong. Quantity doesn't scare me, like the time in fifth grade when my entire class thought the right answer on a test was 21. I knew it was 63, like Galileo knew the earth was round. I always remember the great things that happen in history because one person swims against the current, driven by the space to dream."

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