

Reena Bhatia

Born and Bred in Business

Reena Bhatia, Founder and President of ProposalHelper, writes proposals for the thrill of it

“It’s the thrill of winning for our clients,” she says, “and making a difference. We’ve come in and gotten companies started with their first win, and then we’ve taken them all the way to the point where they’re no longer small businesses—they’re in the big leagues now. It’s the thrill of doing that.”

She started ProposalHelper in 2010, working by herself. As an immigrant, she didn’t have the option of starting her business right out of college because she was tied to an employer during the process of getting her green card. “And in hindsight,” she says, “that’s the best thing that happened to me, because I learned on somebody else’s dime, not my own.”

“Wherever I’ve worked, I’ve always identified whom I was going to learn from, and fortunately those people were willing to teach me,” she says. Reena liked to tie herself to company presidents. The president of the company where she first interviewed for a job as an intern was an alumnus of the university Reena attended. “Where do you see yourself in five years?” he asked her.

“And I said, ‘In your seat,’” she recalls. “I didn’t know any better. I was lucky—he wasn’t offended. He took it to heart and made sure I learned business.”

Reena grew up around business. She was born in Belgaum, an industrial town near Goa in western India which features the second-largest hospital in all of Asia, “so we have a lot of medical tourism,” she says. Belgaum is also home to the largest training center for the Indian military, which often conducts joint exercises with U.S. military forces, and as a child Reena was invited to help exercise the horses belonging to the regiment stationed there.

Reena’s mother was a stay-at-home

mom—“I’d joke and call her the Home Minister,” Reena says—and her father ran a foundry. “My father is my hero,” she allows. “He is my inspiration.”

“My dad would come home from the foundry for lunch,” she says, “and then go back to work and come home again for dinner, and after dinner the whole family would sometimes go back with him.”

“Growing up, I was constantly around his business. I didn’t know anything else. I remember playing with my cousins around melting iron—wearing flip-flops! But we were also in the room listening when my father talked to employees or suppliers, and we learned that way.”

Reena’s uncles owned businesses, too, and sometimes she worked for them. “One day I might be wrapping soap and the next day I might be cutting marble,” she recalls. “Running a business was the way of life we knew. My generation was the first

to go out and work as salaried employees for somebody else.”

Part of Reena’s mother’s job as Home Minister was managing a large domestic staff, many of whom became quite close to Reena and her family. For years Reena referred to one of the gardeners as Uncle. “He was very skillful at splicing roses to create mind-blowing colors,” she recalls. “Black roses, purple roses—our garden had a whole section that was nothing but roses.”

Reena calls herself an average student. “My parents didn’t care about grades,” she says. “They wanted us to have more practical knowledge.” Her father didn’t finish college. Her mother completed a Master’s degree in English Literature and then a law degree, but she never took the bar exam because her father wouldn’t let her leave home to intern.

Reena says that her parents raised her as a



boy. “‘There’s nothing your brother can do that you can’t do,’ my mother told me. But that changed when I turned 16, and suddenly he could stay out late but I had to be in by 7:30 PM curfew. That’s when I knew I would have to leave that country,” she says. “Why should my brother have more rights than I have? Why should my brother get to tell me how to dress?”

Reena started applying to American colleges without her father realizing she was doing so. “I wanted to get out of my small home town, so I asked my father to send me to Bombay to study. And he said, ‘well if you’re going to leave home, just go to America, for Pete’s sake. Why would you just go to Bombay?’ I didn’t realize he was joking—I thought he was for real! So I said, ‘If I get admitted, will you let me go?’ And he was like, ‘Yeah, yeah.’ Because he thought, who’s going to accept a 16-year-old kid? So he said, ‘Sure: if you get accepted, I’ll send you.’”

So Reena set about studying for the SAT exam and the TOEFL exam. No local bookstores sold study guides for those exams, so Reena asked a friend in Bombay to send her books. “The testing centers were only in Bombay,” she recalls, “which is where I spent summers with my grandmother. So I would go take these exams, and my grandmother would complain to my mother. ‘I don’t know where Reena keeps going,’ she would say.”

When a college recruiting fair came to a nearby town, Reena asked her father to take her, and he agreed, expecting she would learn something from the disappointment that would ensue. While they were there, she got him to sign application forms and other necessary documents which he didn’t examine carefully—again, not expecting anything to come of the matter. By the time her acceptance letter arrived, her father had forgotten all about it, but she reminded him that he had told her she could go if she was accepted, and he was a man of his word. “You can go on one condition,” he said. “When you leave this house, not a tear comes out of your eye. You cannot cry over it.”

“He did buy me a round-trip ticket,” Reena recalls, “and he said, ‘If you don’t like it, just come back. You can always come back.’ But I thought, are you kidding? I’m not coming back. This is my ticket out of this place.”

“The truth is that as soon as I got on the plane, the floodgates opened,” Reena says. “I just

sat there and cried.”

She went to Tristate University in Indiana, where she majored in management and minored in marketing. She worked part-time jobs to pay her way through school, and she was very successful there. In fact, during her final year, she was named Student of the Year in her graduating class.

“The only reason I cared about that was that the Award came with a prize of \$1,000, and I had one class left and I wanted that money to pay my tuition,” Reena recalls. “But the dean called me into her office and said, ‘Reena, I’m sorry, but we can’t give you this Award. Even though all the professors have said they want you to have it, we can’t give it you because you have transfer credits from your college in India.’ I was very disappointed, because the honor would have been nice. But there was another prize called The Wall Street Journal Student of the Year Award, and they gave me that.”

Later Reena earned a Master’s Degree in Public Policy at the University of Maryland, College Park. “My father used to tell me growing up: ‘Reena, you should get an MBA.’ I had no idea what an MBA was—I didn’t even know what he was talking about,” she recalls. “But in second grade the teacher asked everybody what they wanted to be when they grew up, and I said I wanted to be an MBA. The teacher didn’t know what an MBA was either. She was like, ‘What’s an MBA?’ And I said, ‘I don’t know, but that’s what my dad said I should be.’”

Reena became a U.S. citizen in 2007. She didn’t want to achieve citizenship through marriage—“I wanted to earn it,” she says, “to do it the right way. I understand the Dreamers, and I understand the political situation. But there are people like me who did it the right way. We earned it. We didn’t circumvent the system. We didn’t cheat. We waited in line and we did it.”

Before starting ProposalHelper, Reena had formative professional experiences at a number of large companies, such as L3, CACI, and Pragmatics. “My parents said I should work for big companies so I could learn how to be big,” she recalls. Her strategy in those positions was always to look beyond the confines of her role—to ask other people about their work and offer to help in any way she could.

Reena tells a story about how she came to lead a project in Saudi Arabia when she was working for L3. She had made herself invaluable to

the vice president in charge of the project by exceeding the limits of her own assignments to the degree that she understood the work of many other team members as well as her own. So when that vice president decided to move to another division, Reena was the natural choice to succeed him at the helm of the project. The challenge was that she had to negotiate with many Saudi Arabian businessmen who were not accustomed to working with women, especially Indian women. “We were considered blue collar workers,” she says. “I stood out like a red dot in a black crowd. But I made light of the situation and turned it to my advantage. So they decided to help me out.”

Later, a company called Headstrong offered her a position setting up their business development process in the Philippines, at a time when Reena was particularly interested in going abroad. “I left India and came to the U.S. and did all my growing up here,” she explains, “I’d always wanted to experience life in another country. You know, I don’t want to sit on my porch when I’m 80 and go ‘What if?’ I mean if there’s a ‘What if?’ it better get solved now. So I decided to move to the Philippines and see if this booming Asia PAC thing was for real. And part of what pushed me to open ProposalHelper—to just do it—was the inspiring amount of business happening over there.”

“It was a gamble. I gave myself two years, thinking if it doesn’t work, there’s always a job. There’s no shortage of proposal managers.”

Reena recalls that her experience with firms like CACI taught her how big companies run their proposal shops. “And we have mirrored that practice,” she says. “At the smaller companies I had been with, it was just me, or me and another person. But if you want to be big, one person can’t do it all, you need a team. The problem is how to make a team affordable for a small business.

“We created a matrix organization. Every part of the proposal process can be modularized,” she says, “whether you need just the outline, or you just want help getting started, or you’re stuck some place—there’s always a stuck place. We broke the process down into modules, and you buy just the modules you want—pay by the drink, if you will.

“We have a person who does just graphics, and a person who does just desktop publishing, and there’s an editor—different people who help the proposal manager do different things. And our

proposals are all fixed-price, not by the hour. No one else has packaged this service this way at price point that’s affordable for small companies.”

“We specialized in outlines at first, and as soon as they started selling, we knew it would work. Once a client was hooked to us, they were hooked.

“We don’t send consultants to our clients because we don’t want clients to have a different process with each new consultant. Everyone on our proposal team is a W-2 employee of our company. Many of our clients have now adopted our process because it brings them discipline and helps them grow—that’s a huge validation for us.

“We work best with companies that are involved in the process and care about it. The client who thinks they’re going to throw an RFP at us and it will magically turn into a proposal—that doesn’t work for us.”

ProposalHelper started as a one-woman operation in 2010, but now it’s a company with 60 employees, including 40 people working out of an office in India, which has grown unexpectedly. “We thought we’d have one accountant, one IT person, maybe one admin person to do other stuff there—that’s all we thought it would be.” But when the American military began to withdraw from Afghanistan, many of the local companies who had supplied American forces need help writing proposals to secure government contracts on a non-military basis, and ProposalHelper stepped in to offer that assistance. Those Afghan companies couldn’t afford American rates, so Reena used her Indian office, where salaries were paid on an Indian scale, and those contracts led rapid expansion at there.

ProposalHelper recently earned the ISO 9001 certification, and they were able to achieve that benchmark in just three months because they had documented their process from the start.

The culture of ProposalHelper, which she describes as a positive attitude toward life, is what Reena values most. “I don’t like negative people around me,” she says. “If you let other people and your surroundings have their way, you will be beaten down.”

She describes her leadership style as hands-off. “I’m a firm believer that you hire people for their potential and their abilities,” she says. “If you’re just going to tell them what to do, you might as well just hire secretaries. And if you let your employees leave their monkeys in your office,

you're running a zoo, not a company. Come to me with recommendations not just problems, because I don't spoon-feed," she says.

"I lead by example. I won't ask employees to do anything I wouldn't do myself. I may not have time to do it, but if I'm going to ask someone else to do it, I'd better be willing to do it myself.

"And if I'm going to lead, I have to do something to improve that person's skill set and their life. I have to make sure their skills are ready for me tomorrow. Because they want to move forward in their career. Either they're going to do it with me or they're going to leave and do it with somebody else, and after all the time I've invested in this person, I want them to stay with me. The only way I can have them be productive senior members is to keep training them and improving their skill sets."

"Teaching is a passion for me. It's a beautiful thing to see that 'aha moment' in a child, or in one of your employees. I'm not going to give you a one-hour lecture, but once I've connected with someone, in five minutes they'll get it. Take five minutes to learn about a person and you can train anyone in any way you want. You just have to understand how they learn."

Reena's advice to young people is: take ownership, take pride, and be curious. "Don't limit your learning, ever. Forget your title. Step outside your box and ask the person next to you: what are you doing? How can I help you? Don't be afraid to

volunteer. Identify your champion and make them your mentor – they don't even have to know – just watch what they do and ask questions."

And work hard. "Where I grew up, work and life were one" Reena says. "There was no difference between what you did for work and what you did in life. You enjoyed what you did; you did what you enjoyed. Sometimes you'll be asked to do things that aren't the most pleasant, but just enjoy what you're doing. That's the lesson I learned from my parents: find the positive. Don't look for negatives in things.

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