

She-entrepreneurs: Leading The Trail

Human Capital interacted with six successful women entrepreneurs and explored the factors that made them start their own ventures and the reasons behind their triumph. - BY **S. AJAY KUMAR**

“Don't be afraid to go out on a limb. It's where all the fruit is.”

- SHIRLEY MACLAINE

In her book "The Amazing Adventures of Diet Girl", Shauna, a blogger based in the UK wrote about her urge and her fears at trying running at the same time, and, was approached by a coach located in Italy to convert her dream of running into a reality. Shauna believed her after she partook in a 5K race after receiving two months of coaching through e-mails. Five years later, Shauna Reid along with her coach started their e-venture Up & Running, an online coaching platform for women from walking to marathon.

There are similar stories of women overcoming their phobia and translating their own fears into business ventures, while at the same time using non-conventional methods such as word of mouth as a strong marketing component to their business.

The MasterCard Index of Women Entrepreneurs has ranked India in the 49th position among 54 economies in Women Business Ownership. The report has also said that there are fewer opportunities for women in India in roles of leadership, workforce participation and entrepreneurial opportunities. While the statistics mentioned are not inspiring to the least, it is pertinent that there has been a significant increase in the number of women entrepreneurs, and, more importantly, the number of successful ventures launched by women are on an uptrend.

Human Capital interacted with six successful women entrepreneurs and explored the factors that made them start their own ventures and the reasons behind their triumph.



To learn is to be alive, and to be alive is to know 'the full picture'." The never-ending desire to learn the full story about anything and everything in life ever since she was a child was the reason for Aakriti Bhargava, Co Founder, BoringBrands and Wizikey to venture into the entrepreneurial trail. While working for InfoEdge, she realized that her job would enable her to learn only half the story, while she was keen to learn the business side of things, and, the working dynamics of her company. Further, her decade long experience of the PR industry indicated that it does not command the respect it deserves since it lacks a standard matrix. Her firm belief that the PR industry is knowledge based industry and her philosophy that if an individual strongly believes in something then the entire universe conspires to make it a reality made her to take a leap into the entrepreneurial side of life.

Aakriti's venture BoringBrands is a 360-degrees, holistic marketing, advertising and PR agency for startups and new-age businesses that are looking to bring about a marked difference in the society by bringing forward out of the box ideas and services. She calls her company as a one-stop solution which deals in building brands from the scratch and is involved in brand messaging, brand visions and content marketing initiatives.



Aakriti Bhargava

Co Founder, BoringBrands and Wizikey

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The Challenges

Aakriti mentions that the challenge she faced during the initial 3-4 years, was the assumption that HR is a department working in isolation, whereas it is in fact a mindset. According to her, treating people as resources instead of people with careers, paths and aspirations, and, functioning as per the KRAs are some aspects that wannabe entrepreneurs must undo in order to ensure that people float their ideas and flourish in their respective careers.

Her Success Mantra

Aakriti says, "my business mantra is to keep your head high, ego low and focus straight, at a time of change." Aakriti says, since there is no guarantee that a business idea will work, it is imperative to be adaptable. She says that the early stages of business are similar to a voyage to an unknown destination, and hence, it is important to learn to master the craft of working well during times of constant change. The ability to remain fluid, will enable the company to sail through the rough tides like a breeze.

As A Woman Entrepreneur

Aakriti says that no difference between an entrepreneur and a woman entrepreneur. She says her life as a woman entrepreneur was never dull and she never had to pause to list the pros and cons of being a woman entrepreneur. While claiming that she has never faced any bias thus far, she says that she has received mentorship, guidance and leadership from the best teachers who have marked a feeling of empowerment in her and ensured that to maintain faith in her dreams.

Her Inspiration

Aakriti says her parents were her biggest sources of inspiration and it was their constant motivation that made her push her boundaries every day. The vision of her father walking out of the house at five in the morning and returning at midnight and yet smiling made her to love her work and fulfil her duties with joy.

HR Practices

Aakriti says that the best practice adopted by her office is that there are no conventional HR rules, but, go by the motto "work together, and work happily together!" She believes that cultivating an independent culture that allows people to do what they love doing brings in the best results.

“Becoming an entrepreneur was not at all a planned move. It was pure destiny”, says Mimi Partha Sarathy, Managing Director, Sinhasi Consultants Pvt. Ltd., an investment advisory and planning firm and the Founder and Managing Trustee of Shri Krishna Wellness, Yoga and Cultural Centre. Mimi, a double post graduate in Marketing and Finance, along with a Diploma in Cost Accounting for Webster University, Geneva actually took a break to start her family. After working with Tanishq, Jet Airways and ILFS Invesmart, Mimi realised that a corporate job did not suit her and came forth with her own wealth management company.

Mimi's financial venture, Sinhasi Consultants Pvt. Ltd. is a financial planning, advisory and distribution firm registered with Sebi, and offers end to end financial services for high net worth individuals. Established in 2005, the company services personalities such as Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, Chairman and Managing Director, Biocon Ltd, Dr. Sunita Maheshwari, Founder Director, Teleradiology Solutions, Sunil Alagh, Former Managing Director, Britannia Industries, Mumbai and many others. Her second business, Sri Krishna Wellness, Yoga and Cultural Centre was established in early 2014 and was aimed at promoting the heritage of Indian Art, Culture and Yoga. As she says herself, "Holistic Wealth and Wellness is what I believe in and both my ventures are complimentary to each other."

The Challenges

Mimi claims that it has been always been a challenge to find people who are aligned with the same passion and goals as herself. She says that the recession in 2008 was a game changer since everyone boasted of being a financial advisor and demanded outlandishly high salaries for no merit. She said that the corrective and the policy measures across the entire financial spectrum post recession brought about a large scale rationalization of salaries in the sector.

Her Success Mantra

Mimi says it is crucial to remain focused on one's goal and purpose in life with passion, integrity, honesty, and trust. She feels that it is important to love what one is doing, and, thus find harmony and success in their respective roles. She also believes in walking the talk to ensure that the people around are motivated as well and will tread towards the same goal.

As A Woman Entrepreneur

Mimi feels that she does not feel anything different as a woman entrepreneur, since the passion, commitment, hard work, integrity etc. are common ingredients for success, irrespective of gender. She further adds that men are complimentary to women, and the combined skill set is a sure formula for success.

Her Inspiration

Mimi expresses gratitude to her parents, late M A Partha Sarathy, film maker, artist and environmentalist, and her mother with whom she set up the wellness and cultural centre for providing her the nourishment for her entrepreneurial spirits. She says that her father took her along with her during his travels, and, also ensured that she received the best possible education in Switzerland. Mimi says that she stands inspired by Kiran Mazumdar Shaw of Biocon Ltd. for her humility, and her Shastra Guru Swamini Svatombodhanda Sarawati for her inspirational teachings of the Bhagavat Gita, Bhagavatam Puranam, and Patanjali Yoga Sutra.

HR Practices

Mimi says that "no incentive programme on product selling" has been functioning as an effective HR Practice at Sinhasi Consultants to bring about objectivity and honesty about the products they sell. Further, she believes in a 360 degree holistic performance evaluation to maximise the performance efficiency as well as the future potential of an employee.



Mimi Partha Sarathy

Managing Director, Sinhasi Consultants Pvt. Ltd. and Founder and Managing Trustee of Shri Krishna Wellness Yoga and Cultural Centre.

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Holistic Wealth and Wellness is what I believe in and both my ventures are complimentary to each other.

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“Even at the age of 21, my dream was to create jobs and become an entrepreneur”, says Sonia Sharma, the founder of GoodWorkLabs, an outsourced product development company and UX design studio. Sonia studied Engineering in Simla and started working as a software engineer for a few startups, mainly to gather an understanding of the functioning of the IT industry. While she was working, Sonia observed that there was a lack of expertise in building efficient IT products with a concentrated focus on design. Sonia says that she became an entrepreneur to fix this very gap.

GoodWorkLabs, Sonia Sharma's entrepreneurial venture began operations in 2013, and, is presently a leading new-age outsourced product development firm (OPD) and UX design studio. Her company is involved in the design and building of mobile apps, software products and games functioning in the B2B and B2C segments, and offers services to companies ranging from startups to fortune 500 companies. It has seen a phenomenal growth rate of 500 % YoY, and, is all set to become the global leader in the niche genre of 'innovation outsourcing'.

The Challenges

Like in any startup, Sonia says, she had a tough time in finding the right kind of talent, and, during the initial years, it was the most crucial aspect, since it could make or break the company. The lack of quality talent, Sonia says, should be blamed on our education system. In order to overcome this, her company devised a hiring philosophy in accordance with their objectives and growth plans. Sonia says she seeks two things from the candidates- passion and problem solving ability.

Her Business Mantra

Sonia's business mantra is always ensure that your processes are in place and you invest in a team, which can deliver. She says quality and on time delivery are the hallmark in her industry which translate into trust that the customer can have on the company.

Her Inspiration

Though she received encouragement from her parents, Sonia says that she was inspired by herself than any one else. Sonia says that she managed to learn a lot from the people around her and says that it is very difficult to carry an open mindset and be suitably receptive to appreciate the positive aspects in people.

As A Woman Entrepreneur

Sonia says that she never encountered any bias owing to her gender and stated that it is possible that she remained agnostic to the bias. Her decision to be entrepreneur since her college days ensured that gender never came into picture. Sonia says that challenges come to you irrespective of the fact that you are a man or a woman. She feels that though the onus is on the society to provide an environment for women to nurture entrepreneurship, women should come forth to bring in that change.

HR Practices

Sonia calls her employees as Technology Superstars. She says that the company has 'spot awards' in vogue for those employees who go beyond their call of duty to accomplish a particular task. Sonia believes that rewarding employees work as a huge motivating factor. Sonia carries immense faith in her HR team which she says works proactively to ensure a healthy work life balance in the company.



Sonia Sharma
Founder, GoodWorkLabs

“Even at the age of 21, my dream was to create jobs and become an entrepreneur”

Sonica Malhotra, Joint Managing Director of the MBD Group says, "My decision to become an entrepreneur was not a conscious decision. It was a natural decision which came from within." Sonica is a MBA from IMI, Delhi and has completed a Programme in Leadership Development from Harvard Business School, Boston. She says that her liberal upbringing, zero compartmentalization as a girl by her parents and their support to her in taking independent decisions were among the principal reasons that enabled her to don the role of an entrepreneur.

In her present position, Sonica is overlooking the company's key projects in hospitality and real estate sectors -right from project planning to execution. She is also responsible for the group's branding and positioning, and is assisting the group in its expansion plans. It was under Sonica that the MBD Group made its foray into the hospitality sector twelve years ago, after they entered into a franchise agreement with Radisson Hotels & Resorts and opened The Radisson Blu MBD Hotel, Noida. Thereafter, the group opened Radisson Blu Hotel MBD, Ludhiana, the first five star hotel in this industrial city. The MBD Group has also come about with a joint venture with Steigenberger Hotel Group, the largest German chain of hotels and resorts to manage and franchise hotels under the brand "MBD STEIGENBERGER" for the Indian Territory.

The Challenges

Sonica says that the biggest challenge that she encounters is finding the right talent with the right skillsets and experience. She says that she had to ensure that suitable measures and the right training programmes were made available to the employees within the Group so that they are sufficiently competent to fulfil the job requirements.

Her Success Mantra

Sonica attributes her success to her perseverance, self discipline, integrity, and her passion to her work. She adds that the initial involvement while adding a new business vertical on which she had no knowledge is very important to achieve success. She also adds that it is always better to divide the larger agenda into smaller milestones.

As A Woman Entrepreneur

Sonica feels that is neither an advantage nor a disadvantage to be a woman entrepreneur since it is always the individual skill, competency and hard work that is relevant. She says that irrespective of the fact that you are a man or a woman, it is the ability to prove oneself that matters. She however adds that as a woman it becomes necessary to prove oneself beyond a limit since people carry pre conceived notions over women as entrepreneurs.

Her Inspiration

Sonica considers her father as role model who inspired her to become an entrepreneur and a businesswoman. She says that it was under his aegis that she expanded and added new verticals to her business. Sonica says that she emulates him in several spheres of her life and remains inspired by his faith in God, and his positive and altruistic leadership style.

HR Practices

Sonica says that the MBD Group is involved in several employee engagement initiatives such as day and overnight trips for the employees and many more. Some of the other activities are inter departmental competitions and newsletters featuring articles and information posted by the employees. She disclosed that the monthly newsletter is used to highlight the achievement by the key performers.



Sonica Malhotra

Joint Managing Director, MBD Group

“
I strongly believe that being a woman neither carries any advantage or disadvantage in business as eventually it is your skill, competency and hard work that matters.

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Vithika Yadav
Head, Love Matters India

“You got to have the passion and purpose and then the determination and hard-work to do what you want to do. Give it all that you've got!

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“I love ideas, I love to think about breakthrough ideas and I love the challenges that come along with trying to innovate. I guess this is why I love being an entrepreneur”, says Vithika Yadav, Head, Love Matters India, a leading digital sexual health platform in the world with over 2 million visits per month. Vithika hails from Alwar, Rajasthan and is the second among three siblings. She completed her post graduation from Lady Shri Ram College for women and was awarded the Atlas Corps fellowship for working in the US during 2007 -2008. She is also an Alumni of THNK Amsterdam School of Creative Leadership.

Regarding her out of the box concept of digital sexual health, Vithika says, "A breakthrough idea in the world of sexual health for young people in India meant looking at the ground realities, understanding what worked and what did not ; and why. And, therefore, looking at gaps, challenges and unmet needs of young people", thus summing up the research and sensing that brought Love Matters to life. Today, Love Matters India has managed to reach to people in five different countries.

The Challenges

In the initial period, Vithika too found it difficult to find suitable resources owing to a tight budget, and she had to overcome her share of the struggles in establishing structures and policies, and define the work culture that best suits the need for the work that they do.

In her quest in finding the right talent, Vithika picked people after witnessing them in action in a few places. Today, she thanks her luck that she managed to find an amazing team which is driven and is passionate about the work that happens at Love Matters. She says that she looks for a combination of skills / education, passion, hard work, and team work in the candidate that she wishes to hire.

Her Success Mantra

Vithika claims that her only mantra is "You got to have the passion and purpose and then the determination and hard-work to do what you want to do. Give it all that you've got!" She says that the fact that Love Matters India managed to make its presence in five countries with over two million visits per month in a matter of five years is indicative of the scale as well as the quality of content.

As A Woman Entrepreneur

Vithika says, "I don't think it is a disadvantage at all that I am woman doing what I am doing. I think there is nothing that a woman cannot do. Absolutely nothing!"

Her Inspiration

Vithika says that she was greatly inspired by her family to dream big, to think that nothing is impossible and to follow her heart. She is also thankful to many inspiring people around her and says that mentors like Ginny Baumann and Supriya Awasthi, renowned anti slavery professionals were a great influence on her as well.

HR Practices

Vithika strongly feels that there should always a good work life balance in every one. It is owing to this that extra hours are simply discouraged at Love Matters India. She says people are not allowed to sit beyond 5.30 PM at their desks. She says, "it is not such a bad idea to sometime work off site from the beach or the mountains - to help break the monotony."

The head of European operations for Mphasis, pursuing her second MBA from the London Business School, a mother to a beautiful child, and, expecting another in a few months, life was possibly dream come true in all fronts for any working mother. But for Priya, it was time for a fresh start. Inspired by the high quality child support system in the UK, she aspired to cater the same thing to the working mothers in India, and, thus help them get back and focus on their careers. And soon, she came about with the concept of KLAY- a chain of centres that provided premium child care in the country. In 2011, she established Founding Years, and, through its twin brands- KLAY and The Little Company, she made available Early Child Education and Day care services to the needy working mothers.

KLAY is India's largest corporate day care chain with 51 centres across the country. KLAY engages with multiple corporates through various day care models designed to cater to the needs of the employees, leading to a committed and productive workforce and has partnered with Royal Bank of Scotland, Genpact, Airtel Gurgaon, Taj Hotels Delhi, Godrej, L'Oreal, Johnson and Johnson, Procter and Gamble, Infosys etc. Keeping high quality and a symmetrical customer experience across geographies as their very ideology, her company came out with a non-franchise or a "Company Owned Company Operated" business model. Priya explains that this model aided them to ensure non-dilution of quality, ensure operational consistency, and, also aided them to maintain a personal touch with their most important stakeholders- the parents. Priya's company Founding Years works on two business models- retail and corporate. While the retail model functions in a fashion similar to a brick and mortar setup, the corporate model generates revenue through the management fees drawn by them.



Priya Krishnan
CEO, Founding Years Learning Solutions

The Challenges

Priya is of the opinion that while teaching is viewed as a dignified profession in India, care is not looked upon in a similar light. The biggest challenge therefore, was in ensuring that they hired those people who viewed their jobs as not mere career options, but played a highly significant role in ensuring that the kids were given the right foundation before they headed towards formal education.

Her Success Mantra

Priya states that her success mantra are Openness and Transparency. She believes that a customer centric business that relies vastly on people interactions, openness and transparency function not only as employee motivators but also imparts the same set of values in the children as well as their parents. She says that by making available high quality child care it is her intent that mothers overcome their apprehensions and focus on their careers.

As A Woman Entrepreneur

Priya strongly advocates that women must not have a feeling of insecurity or being disadvantaged at the workplace owing to their gender. She further adds that several women have come forth with the struggles that they underwent while on their way to the top, the essential qualities are not gender driven.

Her Inspiration

Priya attributes her mother as her source of inspiration and says that she aspires to be half the person as her as a mother. She claims that her very desire to be that mother made her venture out as an entrepreneur.

HR Practices

Priya states that they have come forth with an initiative titled "Gem of the Month", where instead of the Centre Directors, it is the employees who decide if an individual has done exemplary work in a particular month. This she says apart from recognizing the efforts of the employees also endorses the fact that employee opinion is highly regarded.

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Although I do not negate the struggle faced by many women in breaking the glass ceiling at the top, I feel the qualities you need to succeed today are not bound by gender.
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