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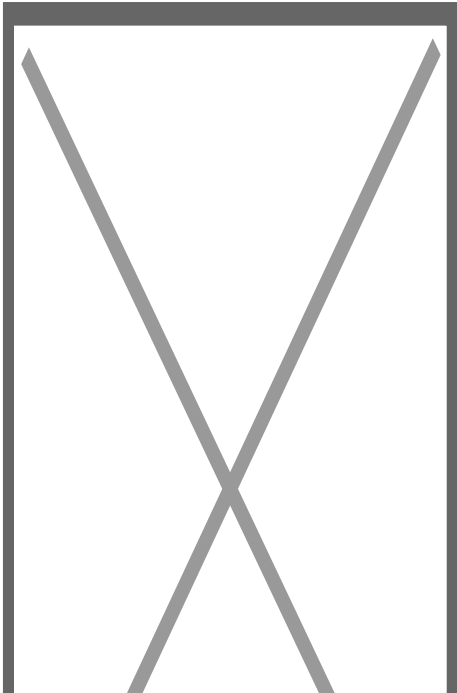
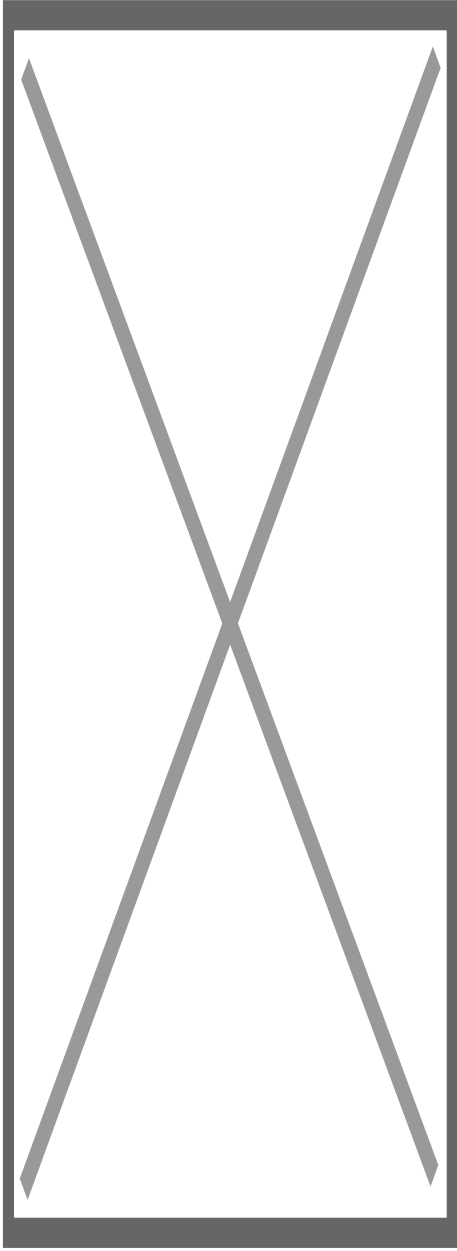
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An incredible networker

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An incredible networker



For someone, who is not from a life sciences background, and who is very young, starting a biotech enterprise is not a small challenge. It's even more daunting, if you are a woman. But Anuradha Acharya, cofounder and CEO, Ocimum Biosolutions, circumvented all these odds to build an organization that is strong and growing rapidly.

Hyderabad-based Ocimum Biosolutions, which was founded by three young professionals-Anuradha Acharya (CEO), Dr P Sujata (CSO), and Subash Lingareddy (CFO)-in 2000, has blossomed into a global enterprise in a short span of eight years. All this has been achieved because of the ebullient energy of its cofounder and CEO Anuradha Acharya and her transformational leadership.

She has successfully grown Ocimum from a company with four programmers to three hundred today and has made three international acquisitions. The company is also moving to a newly built five-acre campus within Hyderabad in another eight months. The company has also bagged the Fastest Growing Life Sciences Company in India, Red Herring Asia 100 Award and IT innovation award by NASSCOM. It has also been on the Deloitte list of fastest growing companies in Asia for three years in a row. As a first-generation entrepreneur, she has also been on the list of "25 tech titans under 35" of Red Herring in 2006.

Rapid growth has come on account of managing new challenges on the business, operational and technological fronts and Anuradha Acharya treaded the path bravely. As a result of this, Ocimum transitioned itself from being a training institute to a products company selling high-value products, and now offers a host of genomic services for the pharmaceutical and biotech companies.

The beginning

A graduate in technology, with a Master of Science in physics, and a wide range of degrees to her credit, Anuradha Acharya represents the young face of Indian biotech industry.

Acharya was born in a Marwari family in Bikaner, Rajasthan. She did her schooling in Kharagpur and graduated from IIT Kharagpur. She then moved to Chicago and did an MS in physics and in information systems.

While she was pursuing her MS she joined companies like Mantiss Information and SEI Information Technology in Chicago to learn the tricks of running an organization. During that time she looked at several ideas, but none of them were in the biotech space. Many of them were in the internet space, true IT and in finance.

In 1999, Anuradha and Subash Lingareddy, a batch-mate turned husband and then a cofounder, along with Dr Sujata thought of starting a biotech company, raising funds from the families. "The idea was we would look at medicinal plants and sequence them. Our original business plan was to have some IP and do some services to generate revenue," said Anuradha.

In 2000, she decided to move to India and start the backend support and develop bioinformatics products. "But the going was tough as there were very few people with a background in life sciences and IT in India. Though we had received some 200 resumes, we struggled to find someone who could create a product that is good," she recalled. We could get some people from the US. Thanks to the downturn in economy then that helped us get some really good talent," she added.

Anuradha was constantly looking for right talent and thus came up with the idea of focusing on human resource development. This led to the formation of the training division where she trained people in IT and life sciences. "So the revenue challenges were met through the training. We were also looking at products at that time. Our products had a lot of traction but our lab in the US took a little longer to build up. However, here in India, it was becoming more focused in terms of what we really wanted to do," she shared.

Commenting on her first acquisition, she said, "In early 2005 our lab got functional in the US, and we started looking at much bigger product sales and bigger partnerships. That was the time when the MWG acquisition happened. We were trying to sell them a bunch of things. And all of a sudden we ended up acquiring a part of that company. We learnt a few things from that deal like making sure that the company that you are building is sustainable and profitable."

MWG was Ocimum's first acquisition and that happened without any external funding. The company managed to move some of the infrastructure to India that created a lot of business opportunity here. Though Ocimum had not raised any venture capital till then for acquisitions, this did not stop Anuradha from scouting for companies bigger than hers to acquire.

Ocimum has completed three international acquisitions, Gene Logic Genomics from Maryland, USA in the year 2007, Isogen Life Sciences from The Netherlands in 2006 and the GD business of MWG Biotech of Germany in 2005.

The company got the first round of funding from the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the private equity arm of the World Bank, in 2006 and acquired the biomolecules synthesis business of Isogen Life Science based in the Netherlands.

Ocimum has now raised capital from Kubera Cross Border Fund (KUBC) for an equity investment of up to \$17 million (including the pro rata investment by affiliates of Kubera Partners, LLC, the investment manager of KUBC).

Ocimum today has 2,000 customers worldwide and operates under three main business units of BioIT, BioMolecules and Bioresearch and has positioned itself as a global genomics outsourcing partner for discovery, development and diagnostics. It now operates out of four strategic locations worldwide, Gaithersburg and Indianapolis in the United States, IJsselstein in the Netherlands and Hyderabad in India

Entrepreneurial streak

Commenting on her entrepreneurial venture Anuradha said, "I always had an entrepreneurial streak. I was the only one in my family who was very much interested in selling and making money and doing things that I was not good at. My father used to pay us for small household works and I used to do a lot of them to earn more money, from painting chairs to ironing clothes. I would sit up all night ironing clothes and would negotiate with him. I would even sell the paintings made by my younger sister (a professional painter now) to earn an extra rupee. Those were some of my early entrepreneurial ventures."

Anuradha considers her husband as her biggest source of confidence and support. She opined, "I know I have someone who is always there. I am getting all the support not just from a husband but also from a friend and a partner. Since he is my friend first, running the company together has been simpler. Whether it is personal or professional we know we have each other's support all the time. We don't have defined roles and we interchange as and when required. That has always been the advantage for me."

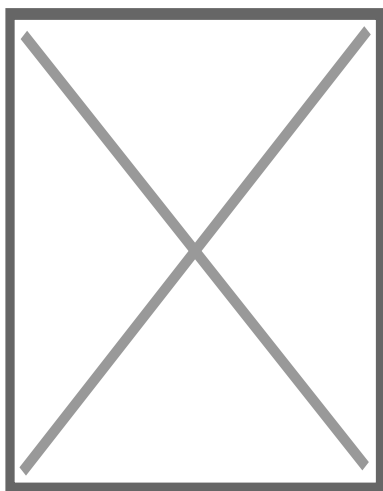
Anuradha dreams of making Ocimum a \$100 million company by 2010. Her journey to building the company was never easy but she has kept going.

Apart from being a successful entrepreneur, Anuradha is also the proud mother of two daughters Neha who is eight-and-half years old and Akhila who is two years old. According to her, it is always challenging to balance the business and the family. "I like spending a lot of time with my kids but I don't. However, I try to spend maximum time with them and either Subash or I are always there. We are both traveling every month but not together, we make sure someone is there with the kids. We also make sure that we attend all their school functions and other events," Anuradha pointed out.

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-Anuradha Acharya, CEO, Ocimum

How did you come up with the idea of setting up a company?

I graduated from IIT Kharagpur and went to the US to do MS in physics and then in information systems. Subash, cofounder of Ocimum and my husband now, who was my classmate at IIT, also went to the US to do an MBA. I was working with few start-up companies there (none of them in the biotech space) and we looked at several business ideas. We saw an opportunity in the bioinformatics space and so registered the company in the US and returned to India in 2000. We took up this office and started building products in the bioinformatics space.

Who were your initial partners?

One initial partner was the Michigan Tech, the academic partner and then we moved to Alabama to find some partners. We also had some companies who believed in us like Dow Agro and JK Agrigenetics. A lot of agribiotech companies agreed to work with us at the beginning. And soon Ocimum was getting much more acceptable among the major biotechs.

Was funding a major challenge in the initial years?

We did not focus on funding during our initial days as fund raising is a process in itself and takes away a lot of time. I was just twenty plus years old at that time, did not have a biology background, and generally people do not take you seriously unless you have worked for 20 years. If you are confident about what you are doing, getting funds becomes easy.

How have things changed after the acquisitions?

We are now seen as a bigger company and a partner for the pharma and biotech companies. We have become more global as we have companies that are more well established in the US and Europe. We have a good foothold on the customer base and pharma and biotech companies see more value in what we are doing now than earlier. Now if a company is looking at genomics they think of us.

Is your focus more on services now?

We were doing services before but doing it in a very small way. We were doing hybridization services on Ocichip platform. After the acquisition of Gene Logic, we took some very critical decisions. We decided to have the labs in the US, Europe, and India. Ocimum now has the same GLP complaint labs in all parts of the world. We also decided to be technology agnostic. We are an Affymetrix partner, an Agilent partner and an ABI partner and now Illumina. We now have five platforms and thus can give our customers unbiased opinion on that.

What would be your message to the next generation woman entrepreneurs?

It is not always the glamour that is seen. It requires extreme hard work and confidence and the right attitude. You have to devote 24 hours a day. The first few years are always very difficult, things starts getting simpler as you cross that phase.

Where do you see Ocimum five years down the line?

First goal is obviously to make it \$100 million and after that to look at ways to create a much larger company.

Jahanara Parveen