



Female Founders: Sarbari Gupta of Electrosoft Services On The Five Things You Need To Thrive and Succeed as a Woman Founder

An Interview With Doug Noll



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As a part of our series about Women Founders, we had the pleasure of interviewing Dr. Sarbari Gupta, Founder and CEO of Electrosoft Services, Inc., an award-winning technology firm delivering cybersecurity and Identity, Credential, and Access Management solutions to the federal government. With Electrosoft's 2001 founding, Dr. Gupta entered a highly competitive, male-dominated market. Today, her firm stands among the Washington, DC region's Top 25 Largest Cybersecurity Companies and Largest Women-Owned Businesses. Dr. Gupta is a prolific writer and speaker who always finds the time to be a mentor and role model to women and girls of all ages.

Thank you so much for doing this with us! Before we dig in, our readers would like to get to know you a bit more. Can you tell us a bit about your “backstory”? What led you to this particular career path?

Growing up in India, I was taught that doing well in school would lead to a stable, rewarding career and financial security. So, that is what I did. I matriculated at a top engineering school in India and pursued a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering. Then, my love of excitement and travel drew me to the United States to pursue graduate studies leading to a PhD. My first job at a leading-edge technology company filled me with admiration for the firm's founder and a deep appreciation of the value of entrepreneurship but, at the time, it seemed like a pipe dream to contemplate founding my own technology firm one day. Several years later, a voluntary, but unplanned, break in employment inspired me to jump into the founder/entrepreneur role. I gave myself two years to make it work. With hard work and determination, I succeeded. Today, my company provides technology-based services and solutions to federal agencies through 40+ active contracts with a total value of \$200 million.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began leading your company?

When starting my entrepreneurial journey, my plan was to partner with a former boss who was looking for his next venture. I drew comfort in knowing he would guide me through the initial phases of setting up a new business and acquiring customers. Days before our launch date, he informed me that he was unable to move forward with our plan for personal reasons. So, I had to choose between looking for my next job or embarking on the entrepreneurial journey alone. I decided on the latter path. I sometimes wonder: If events had unfolded differently, would I have become a founder and entrepreneur? I'd like to believe the answer is yes.

Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?

Early on in my journey I assumed that being a subject matter expert in my area of specialization would automatically translate to customers engaging my new company. However, the prospects I spoke with didn't focus on my credentials as a technology expert. They were more interested in the credibility of my fledgling business. I was totally unprepared for questions such as "Where has your company previously done this type of work?" or "Does your company have a GSA Schedule?" or "What business certifications does your company have?" I now find it comical that I didn't anticipate these questions before seeking to engage customers. I immediately refocused my efforts and made building company credibility a top priority.

None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story about that?

Many people helped me along the way, and it is not possible to mention them all. However, two notable persons do deserve mentioning. The first is the founder/CEO of a company where I once worked. From him I learned a great deal about cybersecurity technology and federal government contracting, especially the bookkeeping requirements. He helped me during the initial years of my entrepreneurial journey by giving me sound guidance and always expressing confidence in my capabilities. He even referred me to the leaders of various government contracting firms for partnering purposes.

The other notable person is my husband. His encouragement and support throughout the various ups and downs of establishing and running a business have kept me in the game and inspired me to greater heights.

Ok, thank you for that. Let's now jump to the primary focus of our interview. According to [this](#) EY report, only about 20 percent of funded companies have women founders. This reflects great historical progress, but it also shows that more work still has to be done to empower women to create companies. In your opinion and experience what is currently holding back women from founding companies?

I would say that fear of failure is a primary reason why anyone — male or female — doesn't actualize their dream of starting a business. Often, people dwell on the potential negative outcomes of taking such a risk rather than being optimistic and believing they will succeed. I suspect other factors that disproportionately affect women and hold them back from entrepreneurship include insufficient finances,

lack of support from family and friends, and perhaps no role models or mentors to serve as examples or guides.

Can you help articulate a few things that can be done as individuals, as a society, or by the government, to help overcome those obstacles?

Some possible ways to help overcome these obstacles include:

- Encouraging successful women founders and entrepreneurs to serve as mentors both in formal and informal settings.
- Incentivizing employers to offer women more opportunities to acquire the knowledge, skills, and confidence to embark on entrepreneurial journeys.
- Legislating that government and industry provide affordable, high-quality childcare options so women can be empowered to pursue career advancement and entrepreneurship.
- Advertising programs, such as those offered by the Small Business Administration and other private and public entities, that are specifically designed to assist women with entrepreneurial aspirations.

This might be intuitive to you as a woman founder but I think it will be helpful to spell this out. Can you share a few reasons why more women should become founders?

Regardless of gender, entrepreneurship offers greater:

- Independence
- More options for work and career
- Potential for financial success
- Self-fulfillment via accomplishing goals that are both personal and meaningful

- Opportunities for learning new skills
- Experiences that build confidence and self-reliance

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What are the “myths” that you would like to dispel about being a founder? Can you explain what you mean?

The most common myths I’ve encountered include: being a founder/entrepreneur is extraordinarily difficult, exceptional business acumen is required, long work hours are the norm, and significant money in the bank is necessary. Worse still is the myth that it is impossible to balance family and work life. While these “myths” are true to some extent at the beginning of the entrepreneurial journey, most successful founders proceed to forge a path that balances their priorities and is rewarding. The road usually gets easier as self-confidence grows, success occurs, and financial freedom results.

Is everyone cut out to be a founder? In your opinion, which specific traits increase the likelihood that a person will be a successful founder and what type of person should perhaps seek a “regular job” as an employee? Can you explain what you mean?

Probably not. In my opinion, certain traits, when present, make it more likely that a person will be a successful founder. Such characteristics include ambition, being

able to envision a future state, being willing to take calculated risks, having self-confidence, not overanalyzing opportunities, being able to persevere through difficult times, being optimistic, having good communication skills, and being able to work with various types of people. That being said, one can develop such traits over a lifetime, and one also can achieve great success as an employee of someone else's company. Introspection is the best way to determine which path is best for you.

Ok super. Here is the main question of our interview. What are your “5 Things I Wish Someone Told Me Before I Started” and why? (Please share a story or example for each.)

Things I wish someone told me before I started:

1. Selling is the hardest role in any business and, as the founder, I am the most important salesperson for my company.
2. Good messaging and marketing differentiate companies that succeed over those with similar offerings that don't.
3. Strategic plans must guide a company's direction. Quantifiable goals and objectives must be formulated, tracked, and reevaluated at regular intervals.
4. Frequent networking is essential to identifying new opportunities, developing alliances, and formulating strategies.
5. The workday does not end when I leave the office. Business-related thoughts will percolate through my conscious and subconscious mind throughout the day.

How have you used your success to make the world a better place?

I do my best to treat every employee in my company with dignity and respect, offering salaries and benefits that align with industry best practices as well as recognition for exceptional effort. I encourage work-life balance and offer paid time off for employees to volunteer at nonprofit organizations of their choice. I also emphasize charitable giving and randomly give three employees each quarter the honor of naming a favorite charity for a donation on their behalf. Last, I do everything possible to model the company's core values of integrity, customer service, excellence, innovation, and respect.

Beyond that, I take seriously my role as a woman founder and practice what I've preached about being a role model. I often speak at leadership sessions at my alma mater and local high schools. I volunteer as a mentor in a program for women professionals working in or entering STEM professions and a similar program for female high school students. Over the years I've also been a part of training initiatives for children from low-income backgrounds, teaching computer science and promoting STEM.

You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good for the greatest number of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger.

I would like to see a movement across all U.S. educational systems to include curricula on entrepreneurship and related skills (such as budgeting, planning, selling, motivating a team, etc.) in K-12 and beyond. Our schools tend to teach children skills that help them become good employees. They typically do not inspire youth to think about entrepreneurship, risk taking, and creative problem

solving. It would be wonderful if our educational system emphasized such aspirations and gave students the tools to achieve them.

We are very blessed that some very prominent names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this if we tag them.

I am inspired by Jeff Bezos' business acumen and technical prowess as well as his drive to improve customer experience. I would enjoy having a one-on-one conversation with him to get a glimpse of how he approaches problems and/or opportunities.

Thank you for these fantastic insights. We greatly appreciate the time you spent on this.



About the Interviewer: Douglas E. Noll, JD, MA was born nearly blind, crippled with club feet, partially deaf, and left-handed. He overcame all of these obstacles to become a successful civil trial lawyer. In 2000, he abandoned his law practice to become a peacemaker. His calling is to serve humanity, and he executes his calling at many levels. He is an award-winning author, teacher, and trainer. He is a highly experienced mediator. Doug's work carries him from international work to helping people resolve deep interpersonal and ideological conflicts. Doug teaches his innovative de-escalation skill that calms any angry person in 90 seconds or less. With Laurel Kaufer, Doug founded Prison of Peace in 2009. The Prison of Peace project trains life and long terms incarcerated people to be powerful peacemakers and mediators. He has been deeply moved by inmates who have learned and applied deep, empathic listening skills, leadership skills, and problem-solving skills to reduce violence in their prison communities. Their dedication to learning, improving, and serving their communities motivates him to expand the principles of Prison of Peace so that every human wanting to learn the skills of peace may do so. Doug's awards include California Lawyer Magazine Lawyer of the Year, Best Lawyers in America Lawyer of the Year, Purpose Prize Fellow, International Academy of Mediators Syd Leezak Award of Excellence, National Academy of Distinguished Neutrals Neutral of the Year. His four books have won a number of awards and commendations. Doug's podcast, Listen With Leaders, is now accepting guests. Click on [this](#) link to learn more and apply.