

NCWIT Interview with Anousheh Ansari

BIO: *Anousheh Ansari earned a place in history in 2006 as the fourth private explorer, the first woman private explorer, and the first astronaut of Iranian descent to visit space. Back on Earth, Anousheh returned to her job as co-founder and chairman of [Prodea Systems](#), a company that hopes to dramatically alter and simplify consumers' digital living experience. Prior to founding Prodea Systems, Anousheh served as co-founder, chief executive officer and chairman of the board for telecom technologies, inc. The company successfully merged with Sonus Networks, Inc., a provider of IP-based voice infrastructure products in a deal worth approximately \$750M. To help drive commercialization of the space industry, Anousheh and her family provided title sponsorship for the Ansari X Prize, a \$10 million cash award for the first non-governmental organization to launch a reusable manned spacecraft into space twice within two weeks. This feat was accomplished in 2004 by legendary aerospace designer Burt Rutan. A living example of the American dream, Anousheh immigrated to the United States as a teenager who did not speak English. She immersed herself in education, earning a bachelor's degree in electronics and computer engineering from George Mason University, followed by a master's degree in electrical engineering from George Washington University. She has an honorary doctorate from the International Space University which she was honored with while she was on board the International Space Station. She is currently working toward a master's degree in astronomy from Swinburne University.*

Anousheh is a member of the Association of Space Explorers and is on the advisory board of the Teachers in Space project. She has received multiple honors, including the World Economic Forum Young Global Leader, DFW International Community Alliance Hall of Fame award, the Working Woman's National Entrepreneurial Excellence Award, George Mason University's Entrepreneurial Excellence Award, George Washington University's Distinguished Alumni Achievement Award, and the Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award for Southwest Region. While under her leadership, Telecom Technologies earned recognition as one of Inc. magazine's 500 fastest-growing companies and Deloitte & Touche's Fast 500 technology companies. She currently works to enable social entrepreneurs to bring about radical change globally, with organizations such as X Prize, ASHOKA and the PARSA Community Foundation.

Lucy Sanders: Hi, this is Lucy Sanders. I'm the CEO of the National Center for Women and Information Technology, or NCWIT. And this is one of a series of interviews we are doing with women who have started IT companies. We've heard some wonderful stories from some very fabulous women, and we have another great interview in this series today. With me is Larry Nelson from w3w3.com. Larry, why don't you tell us a little bit about w3w3?

Larry Nelson: My wife, Pat, and I started the Internet radio show, w3w3.com, in 1998. We archive everything from photos to articles and all of the interviews. And this NCWIT hero series, I tell you, is one of the most exciting projects -- period -- that we've ever worked on. And it's getting a great deal of response from both business and government, as well as education.

Lucy: Well and we're really happy to have you here today, and we're also very grateful that you are syndicating this series on your site as well. Also with us is Lee Kennedy, NCWIT board director and serial entrepreneur herself, having just started a new company called Tricalyx - helping all of us use the web better for our businesses. So, welcome, Lee.

Lee Kennedy: Thanks, Lucy. These are really fun to participate in.

Lucy: Well today, we have a great interview with Anousheh Ansari, the chairman and cofounder of Prodea Systems. I took a look at the website of Prodea Systems, and it's just got the coolest mission. It's a new company. It's focused on the home, on the digital environment within the home. Everything from

voice services and networking services in the home to parental control and maybe child control. That would be all right, too. And home automation.

Anousheh has the coolest title, Larry and Lee, I have to tell you. Because not only is she chairman and cofounder of Prodea Systems, but she also has the title of "first private female space explorer."

Larry: All right!

Lucy: So Anousheh, we are really happy to have you here. Welcome.

Anousheh: Thank you. I'm happy to be on the show.

Lucy: With that, we'll just get right to the interview. We have a lot of questions to ask you about entrepreneurship and technology.

Lee: So Anousheh, one of my favorite questions is to hear how you first got into technology. Was it something through your childhood, or there was a moment in time that it all started being so interesting? And then we'd also love to know, what do you think are cool today, as far as the technologies that are out?

Anousheh: I always loved science and math growing up. I was born in Iran; I grew up there and then came to the United States when I was about 16 years old. And I thought that this was my opportunity to get involved with something really cool and great.

And that's why... When I graduated from high school, at that time the field of telecommunication and electrical engineering was the hottest field, and it was growing and a lot of technology was being developed back then. And that's why I chose electrical engineering as my career and ended up getting a bachelor degree and a master's degree in electrical engineering - and basically built a career in telecommunication dealing with planning and developing the future networks that would allow communication technologies to be enhanced. This is what we see today. And I think that's one of the coolest things today with the Internet, the use of Internet by the entire population - as part of education and just on a daily basis for communication. I think that has been one of the coolest technologies that has been developed, and it has in the past decade.

Lucy: Anousheh, you cofounded Telecom Technologies in the early 90s, when you were doing some of the early work on voice over IP and soft switches.

Anousheh: Exactly, yes.

Lucy: That was a pretty exciting time. We were working on that in Bell Labs, and so we followed your company. So it was a great effort and very entrepreneurial.

Anousheh: Yes. One of the things that really gets me excited and makes me start up companies is the fact that you can basically build something new, try to introduce a change in a way that people are used to doing certain activities, and basically create something out of scratch that doesn't exist and would revolutionize whatever it is that you are trying to do with it.

So that's part of the reason I love being able to be a technologist and being in this field, and also being able to start up companies that introduce these types of new gadgets into the market.

Larry: That's a great segue into a question I've got. Here you are, Anousheh. You're the first female private space explorer. All kinds of opportunities. A wonderful background. And there's always the risk, as well as the adrenaline rush about being an entrepreneur. What is it... You were just beginning to talk about some of the reasons why you are an entrepreneur. And what about being an entrepreneur makes you tick?

Anousheh: Well, being an entrepreneur means that you are sort of inventing something new. You're giving birth to a company. You're giving birth to a new product, a new service. And that's always exciting. And to me, I don't like to just have a repetitive life where I do the same thing over and over.

I love to be able to learn something new, explore something new. I'm an explorer by nature, and being an entrepreneur allows me to explore new opportunities and technologies. And that's the best part of it. But also, being an entrepreneur I love to help people, and I think through the products that we develop in my company, we will be able to help a lot of people.

Whether it's help them to get over the difficulties of a technology and use it. This is what we do with my new company at Prodea. Or helping employees, creating new jobs, new opportunities for people that work in my company. So all along, whether it's creating something or just building a company and giving others the opportunity to build a career, I think it's exciting to be at the helm of these types of activities and that's what makes being an entrepreneur really exciting for me.

Lucy: Well and your new company is in a great niche, I have to say. We're shopping for a new washer and dryer now, and we can actually put it on the network in our house.

Larry: Oh, wow.

Lucy: I'm not sure what I'm going to say to the washer and dryer. But Anousheh, maybe you can help me out with that.

Anousheh: The technology we're developing is geared toward taking advantage of all these new smart devices that are being built for the home. But one thing we realized was that we wanted everyone to be able to take advantage of this new technology and use it. But it is sometimes complicated.

A lot of things are based on PC, and some of our parents, for example, are not really excited about using PCs, and it's a drag for them. So, it doesn't have to be that way. Technology doesn't have to be difficult to use or complicated. We feel technology is something that's there to make your life easier not more difficult.

So what we've done is we've decided to make all these technologies very simple and easy to use. And as much as possible let you use your TV and your remote control to interface with everything smart in your house and manage everything versus having to deal with a computer.

Lucy: Well, it really does sound like a great company. And like I said, it really does fill a great niche for people, especially some of the things like data backup and other things that people put a lot of time and effort into their computers and then they lose it all, for example if it crashes. So it's a great value proposition.

In this series, we are very interested in asking people about their role models or people who really encouraged them on this path toward entrepreneurship. Can you tell us a bit about who influenced you?

Anousheh: I have to say the biggest influence in my life has been by husband, who is also my partner in the business. We started our companies together, and he's always been there encouraging me to take on new challenges in my life. And when I do take them on, he's right beside me supporting and helping me through all the difficult time.

So having a really good partner, whether it's a good friend, someone in your family or a spouse, is always the greatest thing to have when you have a new challenge that you're facing.

Lucy: That's great. There's not many of us that have a partner that's right along in our career.

Anousheh: That's true. I've been very fortunate, because sometimes it's difficult to work with your spouse. But in our case, it's a great working relationship, and we have complementary skills which makes it easy to work together. So I've been very fortunate in that regard.

Lucy: So on the flip side of that, when you think about your career, what's been the toughest thing you've had to do?

Anousheh: Being an entrepreneur and starting new companies require a lot of sacrifice. Sacrifice that you have to make. Because in order to be really successful, your company becomes your life. And then you have to really dedicate your time and energy fully to this endeavor that you start. And doing anything less than that means that you're doing yourself and your employees a disservice.

So, it does require a lot of sacrifice of your personal time and personal hobbies and things that you enjoy. At least for the period of high growth that you experience at the beginning of a company's life cycle, you have to be ready to make a lot of time sacrifices and personal sacrifice.

Lucy: I think that that is really good advice that you would give to a young person who is considering entrepreneurship: that you be prepared for those type of time sacrifices and be prepared for the amount of dedication it takes to be an entrepreneur. If you were sitting with a room of young people and giving them any further advice about entrepreneurship, what else would you tell them?

Anousheh: Maybe just continue on! I don't want to make it sound like it's really bad or difficult to be an entrepreneur. It does require commitment. It is hard work, but it is also highly rewarding. So when you can look back and see yourself building a successful company. When you see your employees happy and excited about the success of the company. When you introduce something new, a product in the world that gets really high marks and everyone loves using it and raves about it. It is very rewarding, and you will feel very good about it.

So my advice to everyone is find something that you love to do and you are passionate about - you enjoy. Because if you're not passionate about something, it's very difficult to be dedicated to it. So find something you enjoy and love and you're passionate about. And then dedicate all you've got to make it a success. And if you have those two things, I think with your passion and dedication, there is nothing that you cannot accomplish.

Lucy: So when you think about yourself and your personal characteristics, what do you think has given you the advantage to be an entrepreneur?

Anousheh: I think one thing that has helped me maybe is being an immigrant and coming to the United States. I had to basically build a new life for myself, and adjust very quickly to a new environment, new culture, learn a new language. So I think a lot of the fears and risk averseness that people may have develop living in a comfortable lifestyle and having everything be provided to them as they grow up.

That sort of went away from me and made me sort of a person that would be willing to take risks and face the challenges and not be afraid of failure. Because being an immigrant and starting life over, you learn to be a survivor and how to face your challenges and basically overcome them. And that has been a great skill set that I've developed and has helped me in my career.

Larry: I have a lot of empathy -- Pat and I both do -- for you moving into a new country. I understand you did not know English before you moved here. Is that true?

Anousheh: Yes, that's true.

Larry: And we've owned businesses and lived in five different countries. And other than Australia, the other countries didn't speak English. So I really had quite a learning lesson to go through. Pat and I, we've owned our own business together for 35-plus years. So I just want to let you know, there's hope down the road.

Larry: So with that, this is my little segue into... How do you balance your busy, busy professional life along with your personal life and your family and everything else?

Anousheh: It's difficult to balance it, but you find little things that basically take the stress away and help you refocus and get energy you need to face your new challenges on a daily basis. Of course, spending time with family is always good. I love the outdoors, so if I get a chance to go out and hike or bike around, that's always great.

If I don't have time to leave, just listening to some music that I love reenergizes me and gives me that break I need to go back to whatever it is I'm doing. You have to find things that are accessible and doable in your busy life and try to fit some time in your schedule to just have time to yourself and be able to recoup and refocus.

Larry: It's amazing, some of the things that you pointed out remind me of Lucy's favorite way of calling it -- not balance, but integrating.

Anousheh: Absolutely. You have to find ways of integrating what you like into your business life. And it's difficult at times, but I think over time with experience, you learn how to do it.

Lucy: I want to maybe inject a ninth question, even though we promised we'd only have eight. I think our listeners would probably love to hear a few comments from you about your insights from your space travel, especially since it's very relevant to the topic of adventure and entrepreneurship and technology.

Anousheh: Just to give you a little bit of background. Even though my career was in telecommunications, one of my greatest passions since I was a little girl was to fly to space. And when I came to the United States, there were difficulties that I was facing because I was an immigrant, didn't have citizenship.

So I couldn't become an astronaut, but I never gave up on that dream. And I told myself, and I believed, that one day I would be able to fulfill that dream. And my career in electrical engineering and being an entrepreneur is what ultimately helped me realize that dream.

And it was a wonderful thing to be able to realize it while I had just celebrated my 40th birthday. It was a great sense of accomplishment and an experience that has changed my life and will be with me forever. It's given me a new perspective on life. And it helps me every day.

For me, one of the things I do -- when you were talking about balancing your personal life and doing things you love -- when I'm very stressed out and I can't get out and I need to do something, I just close my eyes and try to remember what it was like to be in space and to float around. And that sort of brings back all of those good sensations and good memories, and it helps me to get through the day.

Lucy: Well I know, for one, I'll be watching you, probably in your next company, doing something with space.

Anousheh: I hope so too, because it's one of those things that when you do it once, it's sort of like an addiction. You want to be able to fly again, and I hope that I'll get a chance to fly again to space someday. And I'll let you know. Maybe the next company.

Lucy: Maybe then they could take a 53 year old woman with her.

Anousheh: There's no age limit. As long as you're young at heart, you can fly to space.

Lucy: That would be so cool. Well Anousheh, you've really achieved a lot in your career. What's next for you? We know space travel is next. Anything else?

Anousheh: There's a lot of things happening in my life. Of course, our company is in the very early stages and growing very rapidly, so that takes up a lot of my time. But I have also a personal passion for space and making sure that the space industry - or the private side of the space industry - grows and provides opportunity for people like myself who love to fly to space to do it. That's why I'm involved with the X PRIZE Foundation and creating opportunities to expand the whole private sector in the space industry.

Also, global education is something that is important for me. Because I believe that our future is going to be built by our young generation. And being able to give them the best opportunity to gain all the knowledge they need, and to be able to use their imagination, and be able to maintain that imaginative mind they have when they're four or five years old and carry that imagination throughout their life.

And be able to use the knowledge they gain from their environment and create something better - something new and a world that's really peaceful and safe. That's something that I dream of, and I'm trying to do my part in making sure that environment is available to our young generation.

Larry: Anousheh, I would like to just personally thank you, and I'm sure this is from all of us. The inspiration that came along with not only you being the first female private space explorer, but the idea of what you had to all go through behind it. From not understanding English, and working in a new country, and really exploring your passions between math and IT. And it's just been a great story that we will continue to carry that flag for. You're super.

Anousheh: Thank you. It was a pleasure to talk to you guys today.

Larry: By the way, you listeners out there, first of all, this will be on the NCWIT.org website. That's www.ncwit.org. And of course, we'll also have it on our blog and our podcast at w3w3.com, where you can download it 24/7. And Lee and Lucy and Larry - the three Ls - we want to thank you so much, Anousheh, for joining us today.

Anousheh: Thank you.

Larry: Thank you so much.

Lucy: Thank you. Bye bye.

Larry: See you soon.

Anousheh: Bye.