

NCWIT Interview with Elaine Wherry

BIO: *Elaine Wherry is co-founder of meebo.com and responsible for meebo's product development. meebo provides free web-based instant messaging to all of the major network services and records approximately 1.5 million logons per day. Elaine grew up on a goat farm in southwest Missouri and then migrated west to California where she majored in Symbolic Systems at Stanford University. After graduating, she became the Manager of the Usability & Design team at Synaptics and joined forces with Seth Sternberg and Sandy Jen in 2005 to co-found meebo.com.*

Lucy Sanders: Hi. This is Lucy Sanders. And I'm the CEO of The National Center for Women in Information Technology. And this is part of a series that we're doing with just outstanding women IT entrepreneurs. Today we are talking to Elaine Wherry, the co-founder of Meebo.com. Larry Nelson is here with me from w3w3.com. And Larry why don't you say a minute or two about w3w3.

Larry Nelson: Well, just quick I have to congratulate you and your team for gathering together some of the top female entrepreneurs in all of America. And it's our honor at w3w3.com just to participate. We're an online Internet radio show. We archive everything. And we just like to share it with the rest of the folks.

Lucy: So, Elaine, I have to ask you this question before we get started with the interview. Meebo, what's it mean? Does it mean anything? It's a very cool website by the way. I've been on there looking around. And I just love the fact that you can do all types of instant messaging from the site. And that it's got community around it and people talking to each other. But then I got very curious to if Meebo meant anything.

Elaine Wherry: Yes. That's an excellent question. Actually, the name Meebo came about two years prior to our launch in 2005. And so Seth, Sandy and I were at California Pizza Kitchen. And we had been tinkering away on our weeknights and our free weekend just building different types of projects which eventually led to Meebo.com.

But around then we realized that we really needed to put a name to our project. And so we sat down and we were looking for two syllable names. We were looking for something that didn't have any higher meaning. And then I had a preference for things that started with M. And one of our greatest limitations was what names were available. So Meebo was available. And our second choice, if it hadn't been Meebo, was Chiba. C-H-I-B-A. But Meebo was the one that stuck and that we ended up going with.

Lucy: So, now Chiba's very cool. I hope you reserved that domain name as well.

Elaine: It was already taken.

Lucy: Well, Meebo is great. I loved it...

Larry: Me too.

Lucy: And I noticed that you've got some good vocabulary going there. Meebo me? Meebo.me?

Elaine: There's Meebo.com which allows anybody from anywhere, as long as they have a computer terminal, to be able to get web based instant messaging with all of the major networking protocol at anytime. And then Meebo Me allows you to extend that experience beyond just the Meebo.com website.

So, you can take a small snippet of embed code and put that on your website or on your blog. And what we've seen is that allows you to be able to communicate with any people who are visiting your site at that time. And so we've seen a lot of people take their Meebo Me and put it...

Small businesses love it because then they can see who's visiting their site. And for instance real estate agents, they really like to know, "Hey is there anything I can help you out with?" We've seen librarians really pick it up. And then we actually use it on our jobs page at Meebo.com. So we like to just have an opportunity to just introduce ourselves and give a little bit more information about the job descriptions on our site.

Lucy: That's what you need for w3w3.com.

Elaine: Radio stations love it.

Lucy: Larry.

Larry: Well, you're going to have to check us out and let's work out a deal.

Lucy: We really could. Well, I think it's a great company. You guys are on a roll. You just had a Series B of Funding. And so congratulations on a great start.

Elaine: Oh, thank you so much.

Lucy: I think it's also very cool when Walter Mossberg mentions you in the Wall Street Journal.

Larry: That's a fact.

Elaine: It's a good day.

Lucy: That was a good day. Well in talking about the technology, I know you guys are using a lot of cool technology with Ajax and other things. You know that kind of gets us into our first question. How you first got interested in technology and what technologies you think are really cool today.

Elaine: Okay. That's a great question. I think personally I think I would probably be considered kind of a late bloomer. I did not get into computer science or into really a scientific field until I entered college. And I think my freshman year I had a calculus course. And I had to buy a graphing calculator.

And so when I was on the plane coming back home I found myself trying to program a graphing calculator to do a simple tic-tac-toe program and I just couldn't let it go. And I was trying to figure out how to do it. I remember pinging one my friends and asking them how do you try to do randomness? And they're response was, forget the graphing calculator. You really just need to take an introductory computer science course. And I said OK, that's good advice. So winter quarter I enrolled in my first computer science course at Stanford and it went from there.

Larry: Wow.

Lucy: Wow. And so as you look out in the technology space today. I love technology. I'm quite knowledgeable myself. And I just think there's so many cool things. What things are you seeing that really catch your eye today?

Elaine: Yeah. Absolutely. It's an exciting time. I think that one of the things that's happening right now is you see this movement of taking a typical what used to be download applications and all of that, even things like Photoshop-like applications, are all moving to the web. That was the idea behind Meebo as well. Was how do you take that instant messaging, typically something that's reserved for a client and move that to a browser experience?

I think the other thing that's exciting right now is you're seeing a lot of applications revolve around the community experience. And so if you look at things like Wikipedia and a look at Craig's list. All of these products and these experiences, they don't try to define the user experience. They try and put in enough hooks and enough places where the community can contribute to basically evolve their own product. And

I think that's incredibly exciting.

And I think the third thing that makes this an exciting time to be an entrepreneur is just that the barrier to creating new technology and the cost of just having servers and that. The initial setup it's definitely reduced. And so this is just an exciting time to be able to do prototype. To be able to kind of get out there and look at the open source community and see what tools are already available.

Lucy: Absolutely. And I have to say as a side on this. I'm on commission. I'm with the National Academies looking at the IT ecosystem and how it's changing. And all the things you mention are incredibly important trends in the way technology is getting created.

Elaine: Absolutely.

Larry: You know, I wonder Elaine, if there are many more young women and young girls that are looking into IT and really looking at getting involved. But then you went on to be an entrepreneur. So what is it that drew you to that?

Elaine: You know it probably goes back to that late bloomer technology experience that I was talking about when I first came into school. I really hadn't worked that much with computers before. And I think my mother still has her trusty word processor that she prefers much more to her computer that's sitting in a corner.

And so when I was approaching computer science for the first time, I was really approaching it with completely fresh eyes. And I remember seeing things that, how to turn on a computer even seemed foreign to me or how to do simple things, like being able to do cut and copy operations right. And there was also this entire jargon around it. And there was just this expectation that you already knew how things worked.

And so for me what was really exciting was trying to figure out, after I had gotten over the initial learning curve and deep into C and CQuest Plus coding, was trying to figure out how to make computers and how to make applications be easier for people who were not as familiar with computers. So I think it's probably having been on both sides of being both an office computer science person and also having more experience with it, and just trying to figure out how to create a compelling user experience.

Lucy: Moving on in terms of your career and the influences on you in terms of this career path. It sounds like the graphing calculator certainly had a major impact on your journey down the computer science career path. But from a human perspective, you know, who influenced you? Who were your role models?

Elaine: Yeah. That's an excellent question. I think that it probably isn't just one single person. I think it really comes down to, for me personally; it comes down to the entrepreneurial spirit that I found within Stanford University. They do a fantastic job in their computer science and their symbolic systems program of exposing students to fellow entrepreneurs in the area and making you feel like everything is possible.

Larry: Well, that's fantastic. I bet you've been through quite a few things. But let me just point this out. My wife Pat and I have been married for over 35 years. And we've been in business together all of that time. One of the toughest experiences I had was migrating from my slide rule that my dad gave me to finally getting on to a computer. What is the toughest thing that you had to try to do in developing your career?

Elaine: That's a good question. I think people would expect me to say that the toughest thing in my career was probably deciding to leave my previous employer Synaptics, before we had a completely working product. Before we had an audience, before we had investments.

But I actually think that my toughest point in my career probably came when I was 18. And when I was 18 I had a full music scholarship at a local university. And I was en route to become, to pursue music, specifically the violin.

And so, about two weeks before I was supposed to enter fall quarter, I had this realization that I wasn't entirely sure if that was really what I wanted to do. I had worked very, very hard in high school; and I told my father that I wanted to take a year off. And that was really difficult, because all of my peers were going to the same university. There was definitely a certain path that I was expected to go down.

And, just kind of taking a moment to reflect, I realized hey, I'm not entirely sure what I want to be right now. And even though this is the path that is available to me, I really want to spend some more time thinking about that.

So I spent a year doing volunteer work, practicing, applying to different conservatories and also applying to different schools, and just getting out into the world and seeing what things were like outside of the experience before I went into university.

Lucy: To me, it sounds like an incredible amount of courage. Too often, people don't put their foot on the brake for just a moment and really consider where they're headed and what they're doing. And hats off to you. I think that it probably won't be the last time you do it in your career.

Larry: That's right.

Elaine: Absolutely. And I have to give credit to my father, who took me seriously that late evening when I came to him and asked if I could do that.

Lucy: I think that's great, and I think it just gives you so much more information about which way to head.

And speaking of that, we have a lot of people today who asked us about entrepreneurship and if it's a good path for them. What kind of advice would you give them from where you're sitting now, since you're going down the road with entrepreneurship and Meebo? What kinds of things would you say to them?

Elaine: I think the first thing would be, it's really hard to be an entrepreneur by yourself. And so I think the first thing that was really important to me was finding good team members, people that you can work beside, when you initially set up on the project. And it's much easier to be able to set deadlines and hold each other accountable if you have another team member besides you.

Sammy and Seth are the two best co-founders that I could ever imagine. And it's just been absolutely fantastic being able to build Meebo beside them.

And I think the second thing, after you've found the team members, would be to have built the product and then focus on the business plan second. Just because I think that, often times when you are thinking about the business plan first, you don't necessarily realize all of the value that your product could hold. And it's more important just to get the product out and get it in front of people and get that feedback so you understand how it's going to be used before you start focusing too much on the business aspect of it.

And I think the third thing is, after you have a product and it's something that you've initially shown and you have some early adoption, the third thing, once you have the beginning of a business, is to put excellent hiring practices into place. And just to really focus on that early on.

Lucy: I have to tell you I'm pumping my fist in the air because, as a computer scientist myself, I totally subscribe to that. I totally subscribe to that. The best products we ever built were the ones where, will I offend listeners if I say where the market plan was kind of done later?

Larry: That's good, yeah.

Lucy: And they were early prototype. You get them out in front of people. You get the reaction, and you push the technology.

Elaine: Exactly. When we initially launched Meebo.com, we really didn't know how many people had similar problems that we did. It all started from Sandy saying that she was having a difficult time being able to do instant messaging from her home and from the library and when she went to visit her friends.

And so we initially launched it. And we thought that the initial audience would be people in Internet cafes. And we were wrong. It turned out to be people in the office environment.

Lucy: That's right. And all of a sudden you go, whoa!

Larry: Whoa-ho!

Lucy: Even better. And in fact, one of my friends today was telling me he uses Meebo and he says, but the IT guys can't catch it!

Larry: That's really good.

Elaine: Yeah. Actually, it's beginning to reverse itself. Originally, it was something that people would use in order to be able to get around their IT. But now we're finding that a lot of IT people are realizing that it doesn't require download. It doesn't have the viruses associated with it. And so a lot of IT people are now beginning to promote Meebo within their organizations, which is fantastic.

Larry: And they should.

Lucy: And they should.

Larry: And, by the way, I think it's so fantastic that you've got a great team, and the fact that you really honor and respect and appreciate them. That's even better. But I want to go back to you for a second. What would be your one, or two or whatever, personal characteristics that really has given you the advantage of being an entrepreneur?

Elaine: I think resourcefulness, just because you have to think about problems from different areas. When you're being an entrepreneur, it probably means that you're solving problems that other people haven't done before. So it's not as easy as plugging your question into Google or into Yahoo! And seeing if anybody has an answer. It's something that you really just have to be able to figure out and kind of really be able to break down problems and think through everything.

And I think the second thing kind of is along the same lines, which is perseverance and just not giving out. And really liking problems and really maintain a passion all the way through.

And the third thing is just the respect for teams, just because being able to work beside two other people has been a fantastic experience. And it's really important just to always make sure that the communication is good. Always make sure that you really value what the other people are contributing as well.

Lucy: I would probably add one characteristic that I know you have, because it just shows up so much, is passion.

Elaine: Oh. Yeah.

Lucy: I mean it's just all over everything you're saying and it's so much fun.

In terms of you switching a little bit to you balancing your work life and personal life, what kinds of things do you do to bring balance to your days?

Elaine: I have to be honest. I really think that probably I'm the worst person of the three of us to ask about the balance between my personal and my professional life. Just because I really enjoy working on

Meebo and that's something that definitely extends into my personal life as well.

And I think that what does add balance is having a lot of friends in the same space. So, having a lot of people who are doing startups and contributing to startups, who have similar hours, who know where to get all of the pizza places at 11 P.M. on University Street. Just being able to surround yourself with people who are like-minded really helps.

Lucy: Well, and I think the other thing that's really helping, and I think you said it, is what you're working on at Meebo is so well integrated with your passion that that in itself helps bring balance.

Elaine: Absolutely. I think that's really true.

Lucy: I think it is, too. And actually, I'm a fan of the word integration, as well, in this space.

Elaine: Uh-huh.

Larry: She's a really fan of integration.

Lucy: Yeah, I'm a real fan of integration. In fact, I've written a blog or two about that.

Larry: Isn't that the truth?

Elaine: I think it's telling that our original office was my apartment. And so I still have all of the screens and still have the original setup there. So it's just something that's extended into my personal space as well.

Lucy: But we also know that you play the violin.

Elaine: I do play the violin. I enjoy reading. I enjoy biking. I do a lot of things on the weekends, just to make sure that I have a little bit of contrast to sitting and programming and leading the team.

Lucy: Well, and you've also promised to come out here to Colorado to see us and climb Longs Peak.

Elaine: That's right, that's right.

Larry: There you go.

Elaine: Yeah, I did Longs Peak twice when I was in high school, so Colorado is a favorite place of mine.

Larry: That's wonderful.

Lucy: OK, so we'll count all those things as balance.

Larry: That sounds balanced to me.

Lucy: The balance to me.

Larry: You know, Elaine, at a young age, you have really accomplished a great deal. And I know you are really in the process, knee-deep, into moving Meebo to a next level and the next level. But, in addition to that, what's next for you?

Elaine: That's a good question. I think my first priority...I'm not going to promise. I don't have all the answers. So I think that right now, my immediate focus is just doing whatever I possibly can to make Meebo as successful as it can be. And I think my secondary focus is just making sure that I meet as many excellent, excellent team members and people that I want to work on, work with, so that if there ever is a project beyond Meebo, that I'd be able to continue on there as well. So I think it's really just about meeting other people and surrounding myself with good team players.

Lucy: Well, I have no doubt that Meebo is going to be extremely successful.

Elaine: Thank you.

Lucy: And that you'll go on to lots and lots of extremely cool, fun things.

Elaine: Thank you so much.

Larry: Well that's a fact. I couldn't agree more. And Lucy was just getting excited hearing the things you were saying. And this is the type of thing that we have to share with many other people, the young people, with their parents. How about them?

Lucy: Us old people.

Larry: Why did you look at me?

Lucy: Haha, sorry.

Larry: Well, and by the way, her answer also gave us a very good excuse for calling her back down the road and following up on that.

Lucy: Absolutely. So thank you very much, Elaine. This has been really, really fun. And I just wanted to remind listeners where this is hosted. This podcast will be hosted on the NCWIT website, www.ncwit.org, and also on w3w3.com.

Larry: You betcha.

Lucy: So thanks very much. We really appreciate it.

Elaine: Thank you so much.

Larry: Thanks Elaine.