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WOMEN IN MANAGEMENT- THE EXTRAORDINARY JOURNEY OF AN EXEMPLARY TELECOM PROFESSIONAL

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Abstract

Telecom in India was taking baby steps, when Jaya Panwar joined the Industry, as an engineer in Indore, in the late 1990s. This Interview Paper focuses on the journey of this exemplary telecom professional, who hails from the small town of Nagda in Madhya Pradesh. As the story unfolds, we get to know how Jaya surged ahead in spite of all odds and created a place for herself in the primarily male dominant Telecom Industry. Her story is an inspiration for everyone since it is about her indomitable spirit, commitment and dedication. The objective of this paper is to help aspiring telecom professionals to gain helpful insight. It also aims to bring change in the working environment and make it more conducive for employees, especially the female employees so that they can deliver in a challenging role, even after giving quality time to her family needs.

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The Wireless Telecom Industry in India was started in the 1990s. Laying down and managing networks, required highly technical professional as on board 24x7. The telecom professionals were required to work under very high pressure, with demanding technical acumen and continuous monitoring and support of the

mobile networks. Not many female employees were seen entering the highly technical and challenging jobs. But Jaya Panwar was an exception. She joined the telecom industry when it was still taking baby steps in India. Not only that, she mastered her work and sustained the challenges to reach high positions and manage big teams of personnel till date.

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This Interview was conducted in March 2015, through a series of telephonic conversations and Skype calls. Jaya currently lives with her husband and kids in Myanmar, Burma and she is working as Operations Manager - Network Operation Center in NOKIA. Following is an excerpt from the remarkable conversation with her. To keep it as an honest and straight forward account, the questions and responses were kept in the speech of first person. The objective of this paper is to help aspiring telecom professionals to gain helpful insight. It also aims to bring change in the working environment and make it more conducive for employees, especially the female employees so that they can deliver in a challenging role even after giving quality time to their family needs.

Q. So Jaya after so many years of experience in the wireless telecom industry, what do you feel looking back?

A. Today when I look back, I feel it has been a very fulfilling experience and that the hard work eventually paid off but I must admit that there was good amount of struggle. But I try to focus more on the brighter side and move on.

Q. How did your tryst with Wireless Telecom began? And how was the Telecom Scenario in those days?

A. Like many youngsters in those times, when I could not get through the Pre Engineering Test after my plus 2 (twelfth standard), I decided to acquire a Diploma in Opto-Electronics Engineering. In those days, my father used to work for the Grasim Industries in Birlagram Nagda. I had already my mind set to go back to my hometown and join the same company, after completing my Diploma. But as they say, Man proposes and God disposes. I guess, destiny had other plans and I was one of the luckiest who got selected in the Campus Interview as an Assistant Engineer for RPG Cellular. RPG, in

the late 1990s, used to be one of the pioneers in Telecom, which started out with selling pagers. They had two circles, one was Chennai and the other was Indore. Its office was in the Electronic Complex in Indore.

As a fresher, I realized that the job scenario was a different learning experience altogether. I noticed that there were only two girls among many boys in the technical team, though there were many girls in the non-technical staff. I was initially assigned the task of supervising the installation and commissioning of Ericsson equipments. While I noticed that the boys were sent to do the field work, I was very keen to equip myself, strengthen myself by learning the system thoroughly, though in the very initial stage the freshers did not get a chance to have hands on experience. My sole concern was to work independently some day. Gradually, I learned switching CORE, fault management, configuration management and soon I became a specialist in the same. After three years, I was promoted to the position of Engineer.

Q. As a fresher, did you find any similarity between what you studied during your Diploma in Opto-Electronics and your first job experience? What was your approach?

A. Job scenario was completely different. Though it was difficult to draw direct parallels between academics and work, I did find my knowledge of Fiber Optics very useful. As a matter of fact, I still do. And as far as my work was concerned, I had a very structured approach. I was a very planned person. I did every big task in steps. I never took things for granted.

This time I had also started studying in parallel for my graduation and later I also went ahead and completed MBA in Operations and Marketing, as my career aspirations were high and the master's degree in management, would be helpful.

Q. When did you change your job for the first time? Who was your next employer?

A. After getting well-acquainted with the process of switching, I got a call from Reliance where I joined as a Senior Engineer. Now I knew my job well so I was able to justify my position from the beginning. Since Reliance was also one of the starters at that time, there were many flaws in the system, which I corrected and streamlined. The management was very happy with my performance. During my tenure, there was a turning point in my personal life and I got married. And my husband was a professional from the hospitality industry in Indore. For ladies in India, marriage has a lot of impact on career. But in my case, I got a great amount of support and understanding from my husband. We used to go and come back together from our respective work places. And his late working hours were like a boon in a sense that since he picked me from work later than the usual time, I used to spend the extra time to improve the system and add value.

Q. On the Onset of Telecom in India, there were not many female employees. In a male dominant set up, how was your experience like?

A. Working amongst many male employees, in high-pressure competitive environment, I realized that not many men could take a female counterpart's competence in a positive way. They tend to degrade you. Their mindset used to reflect on their upbringing where they had seen women as docile and homely, women who need to be protected from the outside world. So it was difficult for them to accept a female colleague's knowledge, prowess and productivity in a normal way.

Q. In a repulsive scenario, full of gender bias, what was your way of dealing with the situation?

A. There was only one way. Focus on your job! Keep doing the right thing. And sooner or later,

they will realize that they were wrong. Keeping the right attitude and never deviating from your values was the key. I was hard working, passionate and focused, which helped me from the very beginning. One must have expertise at least in one area, in which he or she can be referred to as the Subject Matter Expert.

Since I had a very healthy childhood and had a great environment during my higher education, I was not aware of the petty politics, people resort to, in office environment in order to gain some momentum in terms of growth. But then gradually I learnt to read and judge people. I am still learning.

Q. You had your first child during your tenure in Reliance. Did you ever feel motherhood will hamper your career?

A. I served Reliance during my pregnancy till the very last day. And since I was to go on three month maternity leave after my delivery, I created my back up and gave smooth hand over to the person who charge from me. Though I was a simple person, I planned every move and extremely thoughtful. And that helped me in my personal and professional life both. Child birth for me was a natural process. And I had unwavering faith in the power of Nature. I firmly believed that a spontaneous process like giving birth to a baby cannot be a showstopper.

Hence I tried to give my best to my work and my family too by juggling, planning things step by step and taking help from my husband and my peers. I still remember very clearly how me and my husband decided to work in different shifts for three years so that at least one parent was there for the child. Having an extremely understanding and considerate partner, certainly was the main reason I could sustain the challenges of life-both personal and professional.

Q. Your next tenure was with Airtel. How did that go?

A. In 2001, I joined Airtel. In the telecom scenario in India, those days Airtel proved to be

a very aggressive player expanding very fast. By 2002, Airtel expanded to more than 17 States. And this was when the concept of **Managed Services** came into the picture. It was a game changer of sorts and at that time, we had no idea about the colossal change that was about to come. Airtel signed the contract with Siemens and all the technical staff, including me, was to be outsourced to Siemens for managing the humongous networks. I was very excited to learn and see new things. Working with the vendor was a different experience since the MNC culture was different and the environment was more employee friendly.

But the tie-up did not last long and soon all Siemens equipments were replaced by Nokia equipments and within no time, we, as resources, were working for Nokia from 2003.

Working for the vendor, we were responsible to provide end to end service, taking care of

- Configuration Management
- Change Management
- Fault Management
- Performance Management
- Planning and Optimization

After the initial establishment phase, Nokia tied its shoe laces and geared up for **Full Deployment** from 2005 to 2008. The goal was simple and Airtel wanted to penetrate in all cities, towns and villages in India. During this period of **Massive Roll Out**, I was managing a whole team of engineers working for me. There was deep pressure due to accountability for huge revenue loss. The stakes were very high and whatever decisions I took, had tremendous implications in terms of brand image and finances. This was the time when work pressure took a toll on my health and I was diagnosed with thyroid disorder in 2009 and I suffered from Depression for three months due to the resultant hormonal imbalance. I took medication and my condition steadily improved. Though shaken, deep down I had the confidence to bounce back.

Q. Being on a high position and managing a team of more than 40 technical professionals, would have been different from working individually. Any comments on the difference.

A. Of course when you work individually, it's a lot easier. Your work is the proof of your credibility. Whereas when a team of people work for you, the results do the speaking. It's a different ball game altogether.

Q. Does, being a female boss, have different connotations to the subordinates of the opposite sex?

A. Oh yes. As I said, in the Indian scenario, men generally view their female counterparts as submissive and it's apparently very difficult for their psyche to accept to report to a female boss. It was a very tricky situation but gradually I learned to deal with it. I somehow gained the team's confidence by becoming their friend. Wherever there was a gap, I played the role of a coach. I developed one to one rapport, with each team member, befriending them as my own family. I believed in developing the leader in them rather than leading them myself and it worked.

All your soft skills come handy while handling a team but still your main savior remains the expertise of your field when some difficult team members question your understanding of a situation. They accept you only when they are convinced that you reached such a high position because of your work and not because of a fake referral. Every person has a different thought process and we need to discount on that and manage accordingly.

Q. In 2010, as the Roll Out progressed tremendously, there was huge penetration in rural and urban India. Every person, right from the *chai wala* to the maids, had a mobile phone. The telecom scene became a bit stable after the major upheaval. What is your take on the time?

A. When the Rollout stopped, the focus shifted to the quality of the service. On a personal level, this was the first time I experienced **work life balance** since I could see things from the top. On the professional front, my name became synonymous with CORE. And both vendor side and customer side, were rest assured when I was heading the CORE. For the first time, life looked stable and I was not missing the constant exhilaration that used to be a part of my role and my being. I started enjoying quality time with the family and enjoyed cooking and managing the house. And this was the time when we bought a beautiful new house in Indore and me and my family had a memorable time, decorating our beloved nest.

Q. In such a rewarding career, how come there was no thought of moving to a high visibility role in the metro cities in India, where the headquarters of all major telecom players reside?

A. Since the very beginning of my career, I tended to look at life from 360 degrees. And since I had a glimpse of life in the metros because of my short term official visits, I realized it was difficult to manage family there, while working.

For instance, in Delhi, the cost of living was high and the corporate culture was tough, not favorable enough for female employees with kids and family. And as far as Mumbai was concerned, the travelling time was so killing I never thought about a life there. It was not a win-win situation. The raise in the salary would be compensated by high expenses and loss of family time. I was not desperate for such visibility and recognition.

Q. In that case, how the decision to move to Myanmar happened? Was it difficult to move out from the relatively small city of Indore in Madhya Pradesh to work abroad straightaway?

A. We had a chance to visit three countries in South East Asia, on a family tour, in 2011 and

me and my husband realized that people behave and work differently there. There were many things to learn. Compared to job scenario in India, people were apparently valued more abroad. The best part was that the Asian countries were culturally similar to India.

In 2011, by God's grace, I gave birth to my second child, my son. The family was complete and life looked stable and perfect since we managed to clear all personal and home loans and we became financially free.

The perfect life continued for an year or so. By 2013, my son started going to school and boredom started to seep in. Since all through my career, I have been working very hard and I thoroughly enjoyed my work, I started disliking the stagnancy coming from the systems running perfectly on their own, with little human intervention. Since we had a glimpse of the world outside India, it was not that challenging to make a move outside. We gathered strength and decided to step outside the comfort zone. And I joined Nokia as **Operations Manager, NOC (Network Operation Center)** in 2014.

Q. It was over a decade of your experience in wireless Telecom. When you compare it with the initial days of wireless Telecom in India, do you feel the scenario has evolved in some way?

A. Yes. Initially **penetration** was the sole objective. The focus was on **full deployment** and there was less competition. But now there is tough competition and the focus has shifted to **quality** of the service.

Q. As Operations Manager, NOC (Network Operation Center) in Nokia Myanmar, it was the first time you became a part of the Corporate Team. How was it like?

A. Myanmar has been a different experience. The wireless telecom in 2014 in Myanmar was the same as in India in 2001. The network was new and there were many outages and the

system was far from being stable as it was still in its establishment phase. I was in the front seat again, driving things and playing key roles. I had the confidence that since I handled similar situation in India and emerged successfully, I will be able to replicate that success again.

In a Corporate Team, the culture is different. And there have been instances when I experienced petty politics and back biting. But eventually the tension subsided when stability came in the network. And Nokia, as an employer, has a very open environment in terms of communication across all levels. That has been extremely helpful for me to voice my opinion loud and clear, wherever there was a need.

Q. In a tough professional situation, working and delivering with professionals from different parts of the world, what were the challenges and how did you deal with them?

A. As I said at times, I experienced petty politics from peers and others. And initially, that used to be very surprising for me. But then I gathered learning from such situations and stick to my modus operandi of focusing on my work. I have realized that women have this amazing power of keeping calm under high pressure and they don't resort to fighting and bad mouthing easily. They tend to be more sincere towards their work.

Q. Jaya, your response to the questions is a clear indicator of the clarity of thought and prudence you have. Do you owe it to your upbringing in any way?

A. Yes. of course. As I said before, I had a great childhood. My father used to work for the Grasim factory and we used to live in Birla Gram Nagda. I had two sisters and a brother. Birla Gram was a planned township, with all the high-class amenities. The infrastructure was awesome, with school and hospital in the premises itself. There was facility for sports like skating and swimming etc.

Today I realize that two things have a great deal of impact on a child, one-the environment of his school, and two- the environment of the place he lives. As a child, I had a very busy schedule and I used to follow a set time-table. And there were activities lined up, one after the other, for the day. I was always running around all the time, without knowing the meaning of fatigue, as my energy exuded without limits.

I started learning Kathak when I was in second standard. That definitely had a great impact on my personality. First of all, it's a tough dance form to master and one has to dedicate one's whole being to it. I learnt it for seven years and the discipline, the decorum and the oral and written examinations not only helped me master the dance form but also transformed me into a deeper person, who never shied away from taking the long route.