



In the News

An Entrepreneur's View From The Top

RightWorks founder Vani Kola's visions range from mountain climbing to startups

By Saroja Girishankar

There's a certain clarity of vision--not to mention exhilaration--that can only be experienced 15,000 feet or so above sea level. And it's that clear focus and passion that hiking enthusiast Vani Kola brings with her when she's back down on the ground creating new businesses.

Whether she's hiking in Alaska as she did last summer, training to climb Mount Kilimanjaro next summer, nurturing new business-to-business companies, or caring for her two young daughters, Kola relies on laserlike focus, a tenacious belief in her vision, and tireless hours to back it up. So far, they're all paying off.

At the ripe young age of 36, Kola has already built, sold, and resigned as CEO of RightWorks Corp., the E-procurement company she founded four years ago, to pursue new ventures.

Under Kola's stewardship, RightWorks blossomed into a leader in E-procurement software for enterprises and marketplaces. Its success led Internet Capital Group to pay \$650 million for a 51% equity stake in the company in March. While Kola was satisfied with RightWorks' success and still holds a considerable amount of stock in the company, she wasn't one to sit back and watch from the sidelines. In August, Kola left to co-found an incubator to start next-generation business-to-business technology companies. Many supporters expect her next venture to flourish as well.

"Vani took on the big tiger--Ariba--that had venture-capital funding from well-known companies, with just eight people and angel funding," says Doug Leone, a general partner in Sequoia Capital, the first VC firm to fund RightWorks in 1997. Although Sequoia turned down Kola's first requests for funding, "she clearly foresaw the demand for E-procurement before others and created a modular, lighter architecture that was flexible and easier to implement than competing companies," Leone says.

Supreme self-confidence, staying a step ahead of the competition, and galvanizing others around her vision come naturally to Kola, who never missed a debating challenge in high school and college in her hometown of Hyderabad, India. In fact, Kola had the term "Business-to-Business" engraved on the clock in her office two years before it even appeared on the radar screens of most executives. "I knew Internet-based commerce would have greater impact in the B-to-B arena than in the consumer sector," Kola says, "and if there was one thing that needed automation across the board, it was procurement."

NthOrbit's first three ventures include supply-chain software that lets manufacturing departments order across multiple enterprises in real time, a wireless application for real-time routing and scheduling, and automated payment systems.

"I want business customers to have total visibility into the supply chain, all the way to the manufacturing and fulfillment of their orders, and the ability to purchase and plan based on instant pricing and delivery information," Kola says.

That's a tall order, but Renuka Shankar, RightWorks' director of engineering and a co-founder of NthOrbit, says Kola knows how to get things done--and how to get the funding she needs. Early on, Kola recognized that RightWorks needed help from bigger partners, so she courted and got Wells Fargo & Co. as a major enterprise customer. At the same time, she was striking exclusive technology partnerships with supply-chain leader i2 Technologies Inc. and with VerticalNet Inc. to provide procurement software for its more than 50 marketplaces. Although the i2 relationship subsequently cooled on the heels of another partnership among i2, Ariba, and IBM, the VerticalNet connection led to the equity agreement with Internet Capital Group in March. By that time, RightWorks had posted \$40 million in sales and had a workforce of 300.

Kola herself is a selling point with customers. "In evaluating E-procurement solutions, we looked first at the CEO, then the business model and technology. More than others, Kola had a clear vision for what she wanted to accomplish, while being flexible to accommodate our specific needs in the time frame we wanted," says Steve Ellis, executive VP of the wholesale Internet Solutions Group at Wells Fargo.

With her entrepreneurial spirit flourishing once again, Kola is looking forward to her next mountain-climbing adventure as well as her expedition to secure venture-capital funding for her new company. Neither feat is guaranteed, but given Kola's track record, there's a good chance she'll succeed on both counts.

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