

Meet nine women founders who dominate otherwise male-dominated spheres

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By **Carolyn M. Proctor** – Data Editor, Washington Business Journal
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Women have worked for generations in male-dominated industries. And yet, it's still no easier a prospect today.

Only 6.6 percent of U.S. women had full-time jobs last year in male-dominated occupations, defined by the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor as occupations where fewer than 25 percent are women. And while requirements setting aside contracts for woman-owned companies in federal contracting have helped more get started these days, women in these hypermasculine work cultures are more likely to experience harassment, stereotypes, fewer mentoring opportunities and unequal pay, according to research by New York think tank Catalyst.

Regardless of industry, the path to female entrepreneurship and leadership carries many hurdles. Last year, women made up only 10 percent of top executive roles at U.S. companies, according to a Pew Research Center analysis, including just 5.1 percent of all CEO positions. In 2018, the number of women CEOs among Fortune 500 companies shrank further, by 25 percent, leaving only 24 of 500 companies helmed by a woman.

It takes a tough woman to run a successful company in a male-dominated field. We introduce you to a few here and their challenges in their own words.



Sarbari Gupta, co-founder, president and CEO

Electrosoft

Since founding Electrosoft in 2001, [Sarbari Gupta](#) has grown the Reston company to a nearly \$9 million enterprise that helps the departments of Defense, Homeland Security, State, Veterans Affairs and Treasury, among other federal and state agencies, identify cybersecurity risks and draft new security policies. In August, it won a 10-year blanket purchase agreement with NucoreVision Inc. to provide security support services to the Smithsonian Institution.

About the company:

- **Industry:** Cybersecurity
- **Year founded:** 2001
- **2017 revenue:** \$8.9 million

About Sarbari:

- **Age:** 55
- **Residence:** Great Falls
- **Family:** Husband and two daughters
- **Education:** Bachelor's in electronics and communication engineering, Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, India; master's and Ph.D. in electrical engineering, University of Maryland, College Park
- **First job:** Software developer

What did you originally want to be when you grew up? An engineer, just like my father

When did you first become interested in your current industry? I became interested in information assurance and cybersecurity during graduate school at the University of Maryland.

When did you decide you wanted to start your own company? I always wanted to be an entrepreneur and lead a business. Job circumstances made the timing right in 2001.

How long did it take for you to start your company? Once the opportunity presented itself in 2001, I took it. Within four months, I won my first government contract and the rest is history.

What obstacles did you face along the way? A major obstacle was attaining a position on GSA's IT Schedule 70 and completing all the required paperwork by myself. Also, as a one-woman business, it was difficult simultaneously being both the technical expert doing the work and the business development person trying to secure new work.

How did you finance your startup costs? Personal savings

What skills did you learn early on that most helped to prepare you to run a business? I had to learn basic accounting in order to keep pristine books for a government contracting business. Understanding the financial side has helped me understand the nuances of running a business and given me a broader perspective into operations and the bottom line. Also, learning how to do business development and sales is a valuable skillset.

What is the best lesson you learned from a mentor? You cannot build a company if you don't take care of your staff first. Thus, I place a great deal of emphasis on offering employees excellent compensation and benefits packages, as well as a positive work environment.

What advice would you give to a younger version of yourself? You don't need to be perfect or agonize over the smallest details in order to succeed.

Next big goal: My primary goal is to grow Electrosoft into a larger company with revenue of \$50 million per year by 2022, while staying true to its core values.

Biggest current challenge: Scaling the company while still maintaining sufficient oversight to provide effective strategy and direction.

Biggest misperception about your industry: People believe cybersecurity is all about the use of technical tools. In reality, people and processes are equally, if not more, important than the technology-based tools.

Businessperson you most admire: Sheryl Sandberg

Biggest pet peeve: Professionals who don't invest 100 percent of their abilities into the work products they produce

What is one thing you can't do without each day? 45 minutes of yoga every morning

Guilty pleasure: Salty and spicy food

Favorite movie: "My Cousin Vinny"

Favorite book: "Lead the Field," an audio program by Earl Nightingale. When I first heard it in 1995, it motivated me to take bolder steps toward my goals in life. Since then, I have listened to the program several hundred times – it always gives me the strength to get through the tough times and encourages me to seek higher goals while maintaining a balanced perspective on life.

Favorite place outside of the office: Home with my family

Favorite restaurant in the D.C. area: PassionFish in Reston