

San Jose Mercury News

www.MercuryNews.com

Business

AUGUST 16, 2007

Takahashi: Tech CEO from Iran beating the odds

By Dean Takahashi

Mercury News

The odds that Massy Mehdipour would wind up as chief executive of a fast-growing Silicon Valley software company were remote. But the 60-year-old Iranian immigrant has beaten the odds throughout her life.

That makes her an inspiration. Mehdipour hasn't done things the easy way, from succeeding in school as a young girl in Iran to proving that a female CEO could create Skire, a Menlo Park company that marries the construction and software businesses. Sitting with her arms folded in her headquarters, she isn't overly talkative, but she is a picture of tenacity.

"It's always been in my blood to grow and innovate," says Mehdipour. "I left my hometown to go to a private school in Tehran at age 12. Today, it's the same. You have to have vision. You have to see success. You have to be more confident, be patient, and stay on course."

Her privately held company now has 100 employees and \$20 million in annual revenue. It makes software for project management. People use it to keep their construction projects on time, on budget and audited to protect against bribery or kickbacks. The software is a complicated piece of enterprise technology that tracks every process performed by everyone from the owner of a project down to the smallest contractors.

It automates mundane processes and allows users to predict costs more easily, saving customers on average about 7 to 8 percent of the total budget for construction and reducing the time it takes to build a project by 20 percent, Mehdipour claims. That's why customers pay her \$250,000 to \$1.5 million to use her software.

"From an owner's point of view, it's a no-brainer," said Chris Macon, manager of project delivery systems for the University of Texas, which is using Skire's software to manage more than \$7.5 billion in construction projects. "We have hundreds of projects active at any given time, and it absolutely saves us time and money."

"They seem to have done well in higher education and government operations where they manage capital programs," said Matt Light, an analyst at Gartner. "They are

trying to provide more and more features for people to drill down" into details.

The company has grown for a decade and has Fortune 1000 companies as its customers. Skire's software is handling the management of the Mineta San Jose International Airport expansion and the MGM Mirage's City Center luxury condo development in Las Vegas. Out on the golf course, Mehdipour has to court and network with some of the most powerful people in the world.

That's prestigious work for a woman with humble beginnings. Born into a family with a trucking business, the only technology she ever encountered in Iran were the airplanes that flew over her head. Her skill in math was her ticket to the United States.

She moved to Canada at age 18 in 1968 to study, the first one in her family to leave Iran. She was the only Iranian woman in her electrical engineering classes at McGill University in Montreal. She hoped to design satellites and went to graduate school at the University of California-Berkeley. But instead she went into work in engineering construction at Bechtel in San Francisco.

There, she said, she oversaw construction of Intel's first major custom chip factory in Santa Clara in 1986. Mehdipour foresaw that semiconductor factories would become a huge business. In 1988, she left Bechtel to start Quasar Services, her own construction engineering firm, to cater to both chip and biotech companies. Skire, the software business, evolved from that company.

Mehdipour says the company succeeded in part because it didn't act as a software company, building a software product first. Rather, Mehdipour recruited people with expertise in construction and pushed them to learn technology.

Even with that approach, the work has been hard because the construction industry is so reluctant to use technology, she said. Skire had to design a very complicated piece of software that just about anybody could use on a handheld, laptop or desktop computer. On top of that, Mehdipour has had to teach the executives in the industry how to embrace software that automates tasks that they used to do with pen and paper. Evidently it worked. The business became profitable in its third year, she said.



COURTESY OF MASSY MEHDIPOUR

Massy Mehdipour's Menlo Park software company, Skire, has 100 employees and \$20 million in annual revenue. The first one in her family to leave Iran, Mehdipour moved to Canada at age 18 in 1968 to study, later attending UC-Berkeley for graduate school. "You have to have vision," she says. "You have to see success."

While many women in business have complained of encountering a glass ceiling, Mehdipour says she hasn't run into discrimination in the course of her career.

"Maybe I'm blind," she said. "There was nothing that I could feel. I tend to look at the glass half full, instead of half empty."

Mehdipour wants her company to be a \$100 million business, about five times bigger than current sales. But this mother of two adult children already has a lot to be proud of. She enabled most of her family to emigrate from Iran to the United States. Half of her employees are immigrants.

She has never returned to Iran.

"I've been too busy building a business," she said. Another reason she has not returned is that Iran is not a democracy where everyone, including girls and women, can pursue the kind of career that she has enjoyed.

Contact Dean Takahashi at dtakahashi@mercurynews.com or (408) 920-5739.