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Chief Executive Says 'Thank You' Every Day

By Dina Medland

Vin Murria began earning business accolades at a young age. She was born in the Punjab, the oldest child of an Indian family who came to the UK when she was three years old, and by the age of 17 she found herself rescuing her father's corner shop business when it ran into financial trouble.

She led the fight with the bank which threatened to pull the plug, coped with the sale of the business, the care of her siblings and the distress of her parents, which led to their ill-health.

It was a tough introduction to the world of business but today, Ms Murria talks about the "great privilege" of living in the UK, with health and education available "on the doorstep".

"My mother, who never got an education, wanted to make sure that I did. She once brought someone to the house for dinner who told me that I should read Computer Science magazine, so that's what I did – I didn't even know what it was at the time," she says.

She is now chief executive of Aim-listed Advanced Computer Software Group which, in three and a half years, she has built into a company with a market capitalisation of £200m and which employs 1,000 people, with an eye on expanding its export markets.

In recognition of her achievements in the technology sector, Ms Murria was named "Woman of The Year" at the 2012 Cisco Everywoman in Technology Awards in April. It was the latest high in a career that grew out of her MBA final year project. She was awarded BSc, first class, in Computer Science by the University of London and followed it up with an MBA, which led to a job in sales with Kewill Systems, a logistics software company founded in 1972 and named after two management consultants – Kevin Overstall, the chief executive, and William Loeffen.

Ms Murria recalls: "Kevin spotted something in me – this loud, noisy, enthusiastic and driven 22-year-old – and put me in charge of 13 acquisitions in 15 years. I went through the process of getting involved in every business and understanding how it operated," she says.

By 1997, Kewill was on the Forbes list of global small companies, with the magazine commenting that “at this rate, Walton-on-Thames [its base] could soon be the headquarters of a truly global company”.

In fact, it was headed for difficult times, but by the time Ms Murria, who had become group chief operating officer, left in 2001, she says: “I felt that I could do it myself, having been taught an immense amount.”

Full of confidence, she became chief executive of Computer Software Group, and “did exactly what we did at Kewill – acquired a great many companies”. She then took it private in 2007 at the height of the private equity boom.

She netted her investors a 10-fold return when the business was sold to HG Capital for 150p a share. “We hit the banking boom – it’s about timing but it’s also about taking the opportunity,” she says. Four weeks later HG merged its new £91m acquisition with Iris software and sold the combined entity to the US-based private equity vehicle, Hellman Friedman, for £500m.

After her mixture of working with venture capital and private equity, along with her chief executive and operational experience, Ms Murria’s career has also taken her to Elderstreet Investments, where she has been a partner since 2002.

Acquisitions have been a central theme all through her career: “What I’m good at is creating a vision that people want to be part of – something that is bigger than all of us. “The big challenge in the UK is with entrepreneurs thinking small. The problem is that we tend to have people who are aiming for a small business that provides a pension and a house in Spain. I don’t want to be big like BT but some of our small businesses would be considered ‘Ma and Pa’ shops in countries like the US.”

Building businesses is also about having the right people on board: “I don’t have prima donnas working for me. I like people who roll up their sleeves and just do it, who want to create fantastic businesses and are willing to follow through,” she says.

She joined Advanced, her latest venture, in August 2008 as chief executive. It supplies software and IT services primarily to the healthcare sector, but also commercial sectors. Her approach and reputation are now helping Advanced to grow. When the company sought to raise £30m in a secondary fundraising via the AIM exchange, it was offered £65m – a surprise given that UK investors have historically been wary of software companies working with the country’s National Health Service. Such exceptional treatment was widely attributed in the business press at the time to the fact that Ms Murria was the one in charge.

It is the potential the business offers for combining healthcare with business solutions and the internet “cloud” that is currently placing a gleam in Ms Murria’s eye.

“We have been in healthcare for a long time and are NHS compliant. We run walk-in centres, allow nurses to save a lot of time and boost productivity by as much as 40 per cent by getting patient information direct, with better communication for patients as well as their next of kin. And the software provides proof that people are where they say they are at specific times,” she explains.

The cost amounts to “about £100 per nurse per year, which includes the mobile phone, the air time and the software, and it allows a carer to spend more time with the patient,” she adds.

Growth through exports is critical in her view, and she points to the US market, which has “the same demographics and an urgent need for healthcare”, she points out. Ms Murria says: “I always wanted to be Israel in Europe – it is a country which immediately exports everything, and it is what we need to do in UK business as well.”

Her vision for Advanced is not all-consuming, however. As founder of the PS Foundation (named after her mother) she is helping to steer young girls from disadvantaged backgrounds in India into education.

“When I go back to India I see a lot of young girls who just don’t get the opportunities. I didn’t go to private school myself but I was so lucky to have the support I had – and to be in the UK – for which I say ‘thank you’ every day. When I look at those girls in India, I think ‘there but for the grace of God, go I’.

“Women who feel trapped – in any way – need support and we need role models for them,” she adds. As for “glass ceilings”, when she accepted her Everywoman award she said it was important “to believe you have the right to succeed”.

Secret CV

Who were your mentors?

My mother and grandmother – both amazing women who made me feel I could do anything. Kevin Overstall was the man who saw a talent and supported it without compromise.

Your first big break?

Working for Kewill Systems, because it gave me an opportunity to get to grips with the finances and the operational metrics and understand mergers and acquisitions.

What else might you have done?

I could have gone down the more conventional route and joined one of the professions – maybe become a lawyer.

Your best career advice to others?

The “glass ceiling” only exists if you let it. Whatever happens to you, figure it out and move forward – it’s a “silver lining” approach.