



To celebrate International Women's Day, Microsoft released portraits of the female executives of Microsoft's Canadian Leadership Team, including Chitra Anand.

# Blaze your trail

Innovation and an entrepreneurial spirit aren't just for the start-up environment. Here's what the Head of PR at Microsoft Canada did to take charge of her career. BY KATE DALEY

Are you a young woman looking to advance your career?  
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Chitra Anand was offered her dream job when she was eight months pregnant. Throughout the hiring process, she was pretty sure her potential employer didn't notice her belly, "I barely showed even at the end, because of the way the baby was sitting," she says. She debated with her husband how to bring up her impending motherhood. "I said, 'I don't know how to tell them, I'm scared.' And [my husband] said, 'if they don't want to hire you because you're pregnant, then you don't want to work there.' We want to believe that, but it's very rare to find companies who truly embrace that mindset." In the end, she disclosed to the hiring manager and, after eight interviews, Microsoft offered her the position as Head of Public Relations. This is what she did to make her career—and life—work.

### Stay flexible

Instead of taking a year-long maternity leave, Chitra took only two months. “It was a very hard decision,” she says. “But I knew that opportunities like that don’t happen very often.” Chitra went into the office when she was needed and stayed home to nurse and care for her baby as often as she could for that first year.

### Develop a speciality

Chitra started a career in finance right out of university. She completed a bachelor of commerce at Wilfrid Laurier and was hired for an entry-level position at a bank—but she never loved banking. “I felt very unfulfilled,” she says. “I thought, I can’t do a career in finance.” Luckily, she didn’t have to.

Chitra was head hunted for her french-speaking abilities by tech company Metafore, to work as a project manager heading a merger and acquisition integration. It was during the dot-com bubble of the late 1990’s and tech companies were booming. “I sort of fell into tech,” she says. “I had no idea what I was doing. I didn’t have a computer degree; I wasn’t an engineer. But Metafore positioned the job as a series of problems I’d have to solve and that excited me.”

Chitra stayed for five years before being hired as a director of operations at Waterloo-based software company, Open Text. In her new role, she was responsible for growing the company’s shares in international markets. “At 27-years-old, it was a big career leap and a humbling experience,” says Chitra. **The role required helping make decisions at a global level—which meant understanding things like international markets and cross cultural management. “I said to myself—if I am going to be in business, especially at a global level, I need to do an MBA.”** So after two years at the company, she applied to do an executive MBA at the Kellogg-Schulich School of Business. She was accepted, moved to Toronto and was simultaneously hired as a marketing manager at Telus, taking her degree on the side.

“I joined Telus at an interesting time,” she says. “They were a phone company and were transforming into a sexy, integrated communications company. They were growing exponentially in mergers and acquisitions and I was at the birth of their metamorphosis and transition.”

She started as a marketing manager, then senior marketing manager and eventually, director of marketing. During her time at Telus, Chitra worked on a project called the Solutions Fair, a cross-country program that showcased the evolution of all Telus products and solutions—to their customers, partners and employees. “It wasn’t just a tech roadshow in a convention centre,” says Chitra. It was an inviting lounge setting with food and cocktails that illustrated ways that the technology worked. “It was one of the biggest lead-generation campaigns that we ever did and it lives on. It addressed not just engagement with customers and partners, but employees as well—we treated it like an education opportunity, as employees are your biggest brand ambassadors,” she says.

### Trust destiny

Chitra knows the value of hard work—but she thinks that there’s also an element of good fortune in her career. “I’ve always had to push,” she says. You can make so much conscious effort on where you want to be and then the rest is really being in the right place

at the right time.” At least that’s how she found her current role at Microsoft in October 2012.

After working at Telus for more than a decade, Chitra felt a bit stuck. “I was in a tough spot. I wanted to move on, but opportunities were not presenting themselves. I realized I needed to look outside the organization. I needed to be reinvigorated,” she says. And that’s where Chitra took matters into her own hands.

She connected with contacts over LinkedIn, flew to New York multiple times to meet with CEOs of major companies and went on dozens of interviews and coffee dates. Sometimes the positions weren’t a fit for her and sometimes the company didn’t think she was a fit for them. “My way of dealing with disappointment [when a role didn’t work out] was that it was just not meant to be. I very much believe in fate,” she says. “When you are working the most that you can, and something doesn’t work out, it’s because there’s something else on your path.”

### Maintain an entrepreneurial mentality

Though Chitra has worked for big companies for the past 15 years, she considers herself an entrepreneur. How so? She’s focused on “intrapreneurship” or ways to adopt an entrepreneurial mindset in a large complex organization. She’s so fascinated with the topic that she’s pursuing a PhD on intrapreneurship through Bradford University.

### Keep focus

With a second baby on the way [Chitra was seven months pregnant at the time of this interview], a busy two-year-old son, a demanding job and a PhD in the works, Chitra has a lot on her plate. “I have a very good ability to focus on what’s important. I rule out the 80 percent that doesn’t matter and focus on the 20 percent that does.” It’s an approach she uses in both her personal and professional life.

During the launch of Microsoft’s Surface 2 tablet, she convinced the business to use one of her ideas by navigating through the company’s policies and procedures. “The approach that I took was that I built a solid plan that addressed all of the fears and provided rationale to change—I actually quoted Eminem to do it!” says Chitra. (The original quote? “You only get one shot, do not miss your chance to blow/This opportunity comes once in a lifetime yo.”)

Success came down to having a solid plan, being compelling and providing rationale. “Organizations are complex, there are a lot of policies and procedures, and people are used to behaving the same way—change is scary. For most human beings this is something that plagues us, people are mostly risk adverse because of the fear of failing. Getting an organization to change direction is very challenging.”

Chitra also pursues balance. “My family has a mantra: It’s not what you do, it’s how you do it.” She plans each day and allocates time for everything, including exercise (Chitra completed the Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront Half Marathon, the NYC Marathon and the Oliver Half Ironman, to name a few). “I never was a runner. I started in my adult life and what I love about races is the discipline, perseverance, and determination. I apply this to my work as well—someone once told me that I have an athletic approach to business, which I do!”