



“What Aerobatic Flying Teaches You about Running a High-Tech Business” featuring Val Rahmani, CEO, Damballa who also holds an MA and a Ph.D. from Oxford University in England. Prior to her entrepreneurial role, Val was a GM in IBM's ISS division where her experience included global responsibilities in N. America, Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Interestingly, she came to the U.S. as executive assistant to the Chairman of IBM. Growing up in London, Val didn't really dream of either business or flying, but rather enjoyed skating and skiing. Years later, however, she was introduced to flying, got her pilot's license, and began to practice in a plane

designed for aerobatics. The rest is history: training with a top member of the National Aerobatics team (who became her husband), flying in international competitions and now a full-fledged member of the British aerobatics team.

Experiences and Comments

Val described her life as a series of “lucky coincidences” that have turned out very well, but was unplanned.

- She grew up and went to college in the UK and “read” chemistry because at the time in England, they were doing the “new chemistry” that focused on concepts and not memorization. College in the UK was terrific. Everything was paid for and it was lots of fun. She decided to stay on a fourth year to do research with a professor and, later, at the urging of that same professor, she enrolled in graduate school. That resulted in a Ph.D. in chemistry from Oxford.
- Upon completing her academic work, Val was invited to many interviews but wasn't sure what she wanted to do. Rather by happenstance, she went to a party hosted by IBM where all she had to do was listen to a 20 minute presentation but she ended up signing up for an interview appointment. On the way to the interview she was splashed in a round-a-bout (so she wasn't exactly dressed her best) and when she saw the rather large gray building, she was somewhat underwhelmed. But she went through with the interview and, to her surprise, they almost immediately told her where her desk would be, introduced her to her colleagues, and gave her a parking space. With that, she decided to sign on.
- She began as an IBM systems engineer (SE) in London and spent 28 years with the company. While she liked the work as an SE, she saw that the sales folks were getting the big commission checks, so she decided to go into sales. It was a time when the Unix business was new.

- Later in her career, she got a call letting her know, “Lou Gertsner wants you to come to Armonk, NY to interview for a position.” (What a phenomenal opportunity, reporting to the CEO/Chairman of the corporation!). Without hesitation, when the position was offered to her, Val moved to the U.S. and began working directly for Gertsner. Looking back, she now realizes that she was probably given this opportunity in order for IBM to retain her, i.e., to keep her from “jumping ship” and going with the competition, Sun Microsystems, where a colleague of hers had recently been recruited.
- In one of her first days on the job Gertsner handed her a 30-page paper by an IBM researcher and asked her to do a brief summary. She read it, but didn’t understand it. She decided to call the researcher who had written it and ask her to explain. The researcher said, “I can do even better; I’ve just written a summary and will send it to you.” Val gave Gerstner the summary. His response wasn’t exactly positive! He asked her if she wrote the summary. She told him that she’d used the researcher’s summary. Gertsner, speaking of the researcher, replied, “I don’t understand a word that she writes. That’s why I asked you to summarize. But I’m glad that wasn’t your writing. Stupid we can’t fix; we can work on lazy.”
- She went back to the UK after the time with Gertsner. IBM thought that the company needed to get into security services and saw an opportunity to purchase Internet Security Systems (ISS) in Atlanta. Val then moved back to the U.S. to run ISS and integrate it into IBM.
- Val thoroughly enjoyed running a smaller company and decided she was ready to leave IBM and find another experience like that. A headhunter told her she had all the wrong skills to be a start-up entrepreneur; but later that same headhunter called and offered her the opportunity to run Damballa. Dumballa is a security company whose leading-edge / unique software technology detects and terminates remote-control communication used by criminals to breach corporate networks.

Dumballa – running a start up

- She is extremely proud of the company and its growth; the relationship with Georgia Tech from a research and technology innovation standpoint; and with the culture that’s been developed, she says, by the people in the organization: a high energy, enthusiastic, freedom to do your best, and family-oriented team. When they get a sale, they ring a bell for everyone to participate in the celebration.
- Val feels every experience throughout her entire life has prepared her for what she’s now doing.

Aerobatic flying – her “costly hobby” and passion

- She began by taking lessons to get a pilot’s license. When she was in the air with the instructor, he decided to give her a taste of aerobatic flying and turned the plane upside down. This was not a plane that was meant to do this, though, and

he actually had to turn the engine off to make it flip! She loved it and was hooked!
Next: aerobatic flying lessons.

- Currently she and her husband, Nick, have their own aerobatic planes in which she flies solo and competes internationally.
- She described the experience of aerobatic flying as sort of “easy,” explaining that if you let go of the controls, the plane is designed to right itself, which she relates back to life. If you stop trying to overcorrect, things will sort themselves out.
- In the plane, she thinks about nothing else but what’s she’s doing—extreme focus. (This ability to stay focused certainly helps her in her business role as well!)
- Is aerobatic flying really courageous? From her vantage point, not so much. What she thinks is courageous is being a parent, having and raising a child. (She doesn’t have any children of her own but clearly respects those who do.)