

Creating Your Own Opportunities



Entering the business sector in 1995 and founding a company with her husband, Nishani Ranaweera understands the corporate world from both the employee and employer’s perspective. Just recently, as managing director of Diligent Group, she received the Women Leadership Achievement Award at the World Women Leadership Congress in India. She speaks about her journey and on seeking out opportunities.

By Keshini de Silva | Photography Vishwathan Tharmakulasingam

Could you tell us about yourself?
I studied at Visaka Vidyalaya and I am the only child in my family. My father was the chairman of the Industrial Development Board and my mother was a vice-principal. I had a beautiful school life and I did very well in my studies. I was also a prefect and won several all-island competitions and prizes at school.

Currently, I am an MBA holder of the University of Western Sydney, Australia, Member of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Sri Lanka, an Associate Member of ACCMA and a Certified Member of Financial Management UK. I have 20 years' experience in working in senior positions in the corporate field, being attached to the UNDP as the human resources advisor. I was a director and CEO of Ranfer Professional Services and I have also been a financial controller and finance manager.

My husband who is an MBA holder and a BSc Engineer by profession is the Chairman of Diligent Group. We founded the company together and he is the visionary leader. He has been a massive strength to me. We have two children – a daughter who is in grade three at Visakha Vidyalaya, and a son in Montessori.

How did you enter the corporate world? Could you describe your professional beginnings?
After my Advanced Level studies, I obtained my chartered accounting qualifications. Subsequently I received my Master's degree from the University of Western Australia. In 1995, I started work at an auditing firm. Then I was appointed as the group finance manager at Mercantile Shipping, after which I was appointed as the CEO and director of Ranfer Professional Services.

I did have a few challenges in the beginning; however, you need to face them. Instead of thinking too much about it, I moved on by finding my own solutions. I am a firm believer that if you have faith and determination, you can achieve anything.

You started Diligent Group with your husband. Why did you decide to venture out on your own? Could you describe your journey?
My husband and I were holding senior positions in the private sector. It was our

dream to have our own company. Having stable career paths, we decided to step out of our comfort zones and take the risk.

Our Philosophy Is That You Need To Have Faith, Determination And Commitment; This Is Something We Share With Our Employees, As Well.

In 2006 we started Diligent Group at our house. My husband and I were the only employees and we used my father's furniture and computer. Our initial capital was 25,000 rupees. Today, I am happy to say we have both indirect and direct employees. We have also diversified into eight revenue-generating clusters including local and international recruitment, outsourcing, IT-managed services, imports of computer accessories, exports of corporate merchandise and rubber plantations. Last year, we reached a milestone when we started a company in Qatar. Today, we are the first choice for recruitment in the gulf region and we also work with many top companies in Sri Lanka.

We are also quite happy, because in 2014 we received an Award of Excellence from the government of Sri Lanka; it was a great achievement after starting the company from scratch.

What are your thoughts on entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial opportunities in Sri Lanka?

In our case, rather than opportunities knocking on our door, we ourselves created the opportunities.

When we started as professionals, we didn't have much knowledge in the areas of business presence. We believe in ordinary people doing extraordinary things, so we challenged ourselves and tested our capabilities and skills right throughout.

Approaching opportunities with a learning mindset, we always seek solutions as we go on. That's how we were able to diversify business. Also, it's important to ensure your employees grow with the company, which is why we have mapped out clear career paths and provided them with opportunities to become leaders, be a strength to their families, and be noble people in society.

For anyone thinking about venturing out, they should strive and work towards achieving that. Our philosophy is that you need to have faith, determination and commitment; this is something we share with our employees, as well. You need to forget about all the reasons why something won't work, and fixate on the one thing that will and go on. Also, it's important that if you fail once, you should try again, obviously while learning from that failure. So even if you fail a hundred times, you have to try again.

What is your philosophy on work ethic and work life balance?
Your profession should not just be a job; it must be a way of life. But I also strongly believe family is very important. To be a successful leader or businesswoman, you need to have a balanced family and work life. Blessings and support of the family and loved ones are important.

In terms of work ethics, we follow the Dasa Raja Dharma or Ten Leadership Qualities, and we get our employees to follow this. One Quality is you need to be tough when it is required, but there are times you need to be soft. This is what the Lord Buddha preached millennia ago and that is true even today.

Our vision as a company is to excel at whatever we do, so this is a work ethic that we promote within our staff. I strongly believe that you need to complete the tasks entrusted to you responsibly. Another one of our values is earning money with respect.

You recently received the World Women Leadership Achievement Award in a list that included recipients from developed countries such as the UK, Canada, Germany and Denmark. How did you feel about it? What did the award mean to you?
I was very happy and privileged to have the award. It was a privilege to accept such an award on behalf of my country. I mentioned that in my acceptance speech, as well. The award basically recognises the achievements of female leaders and any new initiatives, both in the private and public sector. So the parameters were leadership, a visionary approach, being a change agent and business acumen. So I am very happy to have received this recognition.

I am very grateful to the World Women Leadership Congress for giving me this award. This is also a massive encouragement to all of us, not just to me but to all Sri Lankan women, to contribute more and more towards the economy and society.

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You also spoke at the World Women's Leadership Congress. What was the core message of the address?

I was one of the international speakers, a panellist. The topic was 'Saying Yes to You: The Courage to Play Big'. So, there, too I explained how we drove our company from scratch to where it is today, and the career path we give our employees and how we treat them. Basically, I spoke about how you can achieve your dreams, through faith, determination and commitment and the importance of having a 'never say die' attitude. So they were very impressed with our journey.

For women, I would say, nothing is impossible. Just set your goals and strive to achieve them. Also, integrity and family are very important. I believe there should be strong support from the family. I have had support and blessings from my parents, husband and children for which I am grateful. I invite all Sri Lankan women to aspire to contribute to the economy. I believe everyone can work towards getting this form of recognition.

As a founder of the Diligent Group, what are your thoughts on the 'glass ceiling'?

Well, I started in senior positions from the beginning so that has not been a big problem for me. If you work with integrity and do the correct thing with faith, determination and commitment, you will be able to achieve.

Education and professional qualifications are very important and of course experience. I received experience at an auditing firm before being appointed to a senior position. While education forms the base, you do need good values and ethics, too. Also, I must thank my school for the experience and exposure I received. There are a lot of people who have education, but that alone is not

enough; you need exposure and you need good values. A good combination of all of this will help you reach the top.

What is your advice to aspiring young women and men in the corporate sector?

There is very good talent in Sri Lanka, compared to other countries. But they need to be given good opportunities to realise their potential. Being in the recruitment sector, we see that local universities need to give students practical exposure in addition to the academic curriculum. Sri Lanka has very good potential and I think we can do more.

My advice to the youth is: believe in your dreams, believe in yourself and be determined. Don’t get stuck in your comfort zones. You need to move out and take risks and create your own opportunities. But more than anything, you need to have a good threshold.