WOMEN IN INDUSTRY

Entrepreneurs Say: 'It's Better to Be the Boss'

Founders. Kathleen Mullinix *(above)*, CEO of Synaptic Pharmaceuticals; Beth Marcus of Exos Inc.

REPLIGEN

a biotech company in Cambridge
(280 employees)

Women make up...

2 of 9 VPs,
but only 1 of the 2 is research-oriented

13 of 40 Ph.D. researchers (33%)

70 of 145 technicians (48%)

In March 1989, biotechnology analyst Lisa Conte was sitting in an office lobby, reading the business plan of a pharmaceutical startup company. A receptionist plunked a stack of magazines down next to her; the top one had a cover story about rain forest destruction. For Conte, then 30, it was "a light bulb moment. I put two and two together, and the next day I quit my job to investigate the opportunity of starting a new company." Her entrepreneurial illumination: use compounds isolated from tropical forests as a guide to designing new drugs. Today, Shaman Pharmaceuticals Inc., in San Carlos, California, has two drugs in clinical trials, employs 59 people, and has raised a total of $68 million from private investors and its first public stock offering.

Conte's story illustrates a career alternative to large corporations and the academic world—a route more women are taking all the time: Census Bureau statistics indicate that during the 1980s, the number of businesses owned by women grew four times as fast as the number owned by men. Among women scientists and engineers, the yen for self-employment is strong: In 1989, 11% of women Ph.D. scientists and engineers were self-employed, compared with 6% of men, according to the National Research Council. Unfortunately, there's no data on how many of these are true entrepreneurs, as opposed to women working as consultants, and anecdotal reports from technology watchers identify relatively few women who have founded new technology firms. Still, an informal survey by *Science* uncovered several women scientists and engineers who, like Conte, had experienced a "light bulb moment."

The motives of these women are similar to those of men who start companies: a desire to be their own boss and develop a particular product. But women also find that starting a business can offer a way around the glass ceiling as well as flexibility in combining career and children. What's more, women entrepreneurs take pleasure in creating their own corporate culture. "How do you find an environment supportive of women in science? One answer is: by creating that environment yourself," says Henry Etzkowitz, a sociologist at Rutgers University who is doing a National Science Foundation-supported study of women high-tech entrepreneurs.

Avoiding the glass ceiling was part of the motivation for Beth Marcus, 34, to start her own company. With a Ph.D. in biomechanical engineering, Marcus spent several years at Arthur D. Little Inc. developing new devices to measure movement in the joints of the hand. But she noticed that there were few women above her at the company. "So I figured, Why struggle here when I can go create my own structure?" She began Exos Inc., in 1988 in her basement with $5,000 in savings. That year she sold $47,000 worth of devices that help virtual-reality researchers control robots; this year, she projects sales of $2 million to $3 million in software and hardware.

Marcus believes that her gender-bending training as an engineer helped nurture the entrepreneurial spirit. "When you're a woman who goes through high-tech education, you're not doing what the rest of the world told you to do. So you're more likely to want to do things your own way....When you buck systems all along, you get conditioned to think, 'Well, if I'm going to work this hard, I'm going to work for myself.' "

Corporations are the most common springboard to entrepreneurship, but women are also starting companies straight out of graduate school. Computer scientists Galina Datskovsky and her husband, Mark Moerdler, began their consulting firm while still in graduate school at Columbia University. Then, Ph.D.s in hand, they confronted the "two-body problem" and found they weren't satisfied with the academic jobs they could get in the same city. So they turned their business, MDY Advanced Technologies, into a full-time proposition. The firm now has $3 million in revenues, 15 employees, and offers both software and hardware.

By enabling them to live in the same town, starting a business gave Datskovsky and Moerdler's family life a boost. They're not alone in exploiting the freedom to combine work and family that comes with self-employment. Pharmacologist Sarah Wheeler, 41, wanted a part-time job with flexible hours after her twins were born in 1987. So she left her job with a major pharmaceutical company to become a part-time consultant. For her, self-employment is a tradeoff: fewer cutting-edge assignments and slower career progress, versus a flexible schedule and the chance to work at home.

Part-time, self-employed work may not sound very entrepreneurial. But sometimes it's a route to grander operations. Sandy Kurtzig, 45, started her software company, ASK Computer Corp., in her spare bedroom in 1972 "so I could be closer to home." But as the computer field expanded, her software products took off and she began working 12- to 14-hour days. To keep up her "part-time" company, she soon had a full-time housekeeper to watch her two sons. The company now has $430 million in revenues.

Clearly, being an entrepreneur has its rewards. But it's not the path to paradise. In fact, the demands of a young business can easily lead to divorce, says Edward B. Roberts, who's been studying high-tech entrepreneurs for decades from his post at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Nor does entrepreneurship mean gender discrimination is a thing of the past. While female entrepreneurs can create the culture of their own companies, they can't control the outside world, which influences such key business operations as financing.

Getting an infusion of capital may be especially tough for women, says Roberts. Kathleen Mullinix, 48, founder and CEO of Synaptic Pharmaceuticals in Paramus, New Jersey, remembers that after her pitch for funds, one venture capitalist asked whether, "being a woman and all" she planned to be CEO for the long term.

Despite such misadventures, company founders like Mullinix relish their role. For her, Synaptic offered the chance to commercialize a new approach to designing drugs for the nervous system, based on human molecular biology. And it gave her an opportunity to concoct the culture of her working environment from scratch. When it comes to setting the tone for an organization, says Mullinix, "it's always better to be the boss."

–E.C.