

BUSINESS

a measure of success

In the field of business, where the stress is on achievement, Devi Vallabhaneni has set new standards for measuring that achievement and fortifying management skills, **SWATHI REDDY** reports

DEVI VALLABHANENI can still recall sitting at the kitchen table as a teenager and watching her father chart out on the chalkboard his recommendations for her professional pursuits. She found herself nodding in agreement as he made his way across the chalkboard, advising her to major in accounting in college, obtain certification as a public accountant, then proceed to a master's in business management.

"During that time, a teacher in school recommended reading Lee Iacocca's book on management, which spoke of what they don't teach you in business school. So I was exposed to the big picture at a young age," says Vallabhaneni, 38, a graduate of Harvard Business School.

The big picture is exactly what Vallabhaneni, who has lived in major metropolises in the United States as well as in Hong Kong and Singapore, is focused on now. She wants to bring business management to the forefront of professionally recognized career paths.

"There is a common entry point in medicine, law and accounting that elevates these professions to a higher standard. A body oversees each profession; for example, the American Medical Association or the American Bar Association. Our goal is to have the equivalent happen in business management," she says.

With the help of her father, S. Rao Vallabhaneni, she launched the Association of Professionals in Business Management

(APBM) in 2000. The nonprofit, based in Chicago, aims to establish a uniform model by which business management skills can be gauged, and has its own code of ethics and bylaws.

Vallabhaneni credits her father with APBM's early triumphs. "He has four master's degrees, 24 professional certifications in business and has authored approximately 60 publications in business. It is because of his intimate experience with certifications that we are able to be successful in our young stage as an organization."

S. Rao Vallabhaneni is an educator who has taught subjects such as finance, accounting, auditing and operations to business students at several universities in Chicago. In 1990, he founded SRV Professional



Dishing With Devi

Books on her bedside table: "Right now, I have more audiobooks on my iPod than sitting on my bedside table. On my iPod, I currently have 'The Omnivore's Dilemma,' 'iWoz,' 'The Age of Turbulence' and a biography of Catherine de Medici."

Whom she admires: "I try to look for admirable qualities in everyone I meet. That said, I admire the way Robert Rubin transcends politics, Maria Bartiromo's drive and the way Michael Bloomberg matches philanthropy with business achievement."

Her ideal vacation spot: "Just being on a vacation is ideal - I'm not really picky as to locale. I'm a Francophile at heart, so any trip to Paris, however long or short, is always ideal."

A Web site she can't live without: www.timeanddate.com/worldclock "At APBM, we're always coordinating conference calls with so many of our international clients and partners, so this web site really helps keep us organized and punctual."

A lesson she wishes was taught in business schools: "Perception can often be worse than reality. How you are perceived may, fortunately or unfortunately, not reflect who you are. In an ideal world, how you are perceived is equal to what's inside of you."

Best spot for a power lunch: "I'm not sure if I'm the power lunch type, but I do love Fred's at Barneys (in New York)."

Where she would love to jet off to: "The Maldives. It looks so idyllic. Time appears to stand still there."

Favorite film: " 'Sliding Doors' because my life has been full of so many 'sliding doors' moments. I often think about how seemingly unrelated moments add up to the big picture of our lives."

What she wants to attempt: Painting. "When I was a child, I spent so much time with my crayons and coloring books. I'm both fascinated and terrified by the idea of me painting something worth looking at repeatedly."

How she spends her leisure time: "Cooking, baking and watching movies keep me sane. These are the activities where it's easy to disconnect from daily life."

MANAGEMENT MODEL: A Harvard Business School graduate, Devi Vallabhaneni is the founder and president of a nonprofit that sets standards to gauge management skills.

◆ Publications to serve the knowledge needs of business professionals and has written more than 50 trade books, study guides and review material for various professional organizations in the U.S.

The apple hardly falls far from the tree. While Devi Vallabhaneni has a laugh that is quick to surface and an engaging manner that draws you in, it's her razor-sharp analytical skills that have kept her on top of her game. Born in Andhra Pradesh, Vallabhaneni came to the United States as a very young child. With her father often traveling during her formative years, it was her mother, Sukumari Vallabhaneni, who was often the guiding force.

"My mother influenced my work ethic," Vallabhaneni says. "I didn't have the opportunity to know my maternal grandparents, so she shared stories about her father, my grandfather. He would say, 'Hard work always pays off. You may not know when or how, but it always does.' Not only is this a guiding principle in my life, I do believe it to be a universal truth. I can only focus on the inputs, not the outcome. I know success is a function of hard work."

"I remember telling my mother, when I was about 6 or 7, that I didn't want to be like the other kids at school. I told her I would have a very different and big life," Vallabhaneni recalls. "She has always encouraged this vision and uses this childhood episode to remind me that while my life path is often the road less-chosen, I knew at a very young age that I'd have a big life ahead of me."

A life with an ambitious path it is. APBM has had its share of skeptics and critics, mainly because it's a relatively new initiative, but from Vallabhaneni's patient and thorough explanation, it seems the nonprofit is slowly gaining credibility among those in the business community.

In creating the Certified Business Manager (CBM) and the Certified Associate Business Manager (CABM) professional designations, Vallabhaneni is fully aware that, as a field, business is quite different from engineering



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or accounting. "Business is so dynamic with creative, entrepreneurial types like Bill Gates, but my point in creating the CBM certification is that the industry become voluntarily self-regulated," she says.

She adds the CBM program is not intended to replace an MBA, but instead enhances the knowledge gained with a formal education. Requirements to enroll include a college degree and four years of work experience.

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Work is where Vallabhaneni sharpened her own understanding of the business world. Prior to becoming the chief executive officer and president of APBM, she designed international expansion strategies for retail companies including Gap, Ann Taylor and Banana Republic. She also did a stint at Arthur Andersen, working with the company's Singapore and Hong Kong offices.

The 16-hour CBM exam, based on the curriculum Vallabhaneni developed with her father over a four-year period, is made up of four parts: the first two parts are composed of 10 modules that center on understanding global business strategies, economics, mar-

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keting and operations, while the other two parts focus on the application of these concepts, including a written portion that requires an analysis of a Harvard Business School study. Each part of the CBM exam costs \$360 for APBM members and \$400 for nonmembers; members who register for all four parts at once pay \$1,400. The CABM exam is a bachelor's-level professional certification based on a pre-MBA curriculum.

"In my assessment, anyone interested in the field of general business management ◆

◆ can spend five to six hours quality time per week for a year preparing for these exams. It's affordable and you benefit professionally in terms of valuable insight gained in all aspects of business management," says Naresh Velupala, who completed the course in 2005, and continues to utilize the lessons learned in his role as project manager with a large insurance firm.

"I think the CBM course is a great way to enrich your understanding of the corporate world," says Vineet Sawant, also a graduate, who works for a global technology services company as a senior solution architect. "Often, the linkage between technical work and business strategy gets lost in translation. The CBM course offers a practical and tangible way to bridge this gap."

Companies such as IBM and Avaya have taken notice of the exam's impressive scope, footing the bill for their employees to be certified. APBM intends to expand its reach to global proportions, and has already made significant progress with programs available in Vietnam, Greece, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and India.

INDIASUCCESS

India, in particular, has been the recipient of much of APBM's recent attention. "After the U.S., India is our second-largest source of Web traffic. The first set of companies attracted to CBM – IBM and Avaya – came on their own and it just happened organically a couple of years ago," Vallabhaneni says.

"We have had tremendous success with IT companies, which is important because that's where outsourcing – as in moving up the knowledge-based chain – started, and now it's moving to business services," she adds.

A recent article in *The New York Times* attests to this point. "The first wave of slicing up services work and sending it abroad has been all about business operations. Computer programming, call centers, product design and back-office jobs like accounting and billing have to some degree migrated abroad, mainly to India," Steve Lohr writes in *The New York Times* in an article amusingly



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titled "Hello India? I Need Help with my Math."

"The second wave, according to some entrepreneurs, venture capitalists and offshoring veterans, will be the globalization of consumer services," writes Lohr, a senior writer and technology reporter with the *Times*.

APBM has programs available in Hyderabad, Delhi and Banagalore. Vallabhaneni expects to open a branch office in India within the next few years as demand for the certification increases. In the three years that the exam has been available, more than 3,000 people have become CBMs.

For now, though, Chicago will remain her home. "It is where I belong, both personally and professionally. As the CBM and CABM grow in international recognition, especially in India, I have the best of both words: Chicago as my home base and being able to spend quality time ... working on a global level."

On the horizon for this year is further development of their e-learning tools. The 21 pounds of materials in use doesn't quite lend itself to easy transport as witnessed by Vallabhaneni's business bag – a travel size

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carry-on that houses the program's materials.

Vallabhaneni also plans to have an exam update to ensure that the topics covered are still relevant and cutting-edge for a new crop of students. Plus, at the request of many graduates, more networking opportunities will be offered – in relaxed social settings where grads and students can discuss jobs, experiences and, as Vallabhaneni aptly points out, "capitalize on their skills."

To see how your business acumen measures up, head to the company's Web site, www.apbm.org.



BIG PLANS: Vallabhaneni, 38, offers programs in Hyderabad, Bangalore and delhi and plans to open an India office soon.

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