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2008 Businesswoman of the Year: Ranjini Poddar

President, Co-founder, Artech Information Systems

BY CHRIS NELSON

If someone had told Ranjini Poddar in 1992 that she would someday be running one of the fastest-growing companies in America, then she probably would have laughed in response. Fast-forward 16 years – Poddar is president of Artech Information Systems LLC, a Cedar Knolls, N.J.-based IT-services provider with revenues approaching nearly \$200 million, an international headcount of more than 2,000 people and in recent years, recognition from numerous business publications and research groups as one of the fastest-growing companies – public or private – in the United States.

In acknowledgement of her accomplishments as a businesswoman and entrepreneur, the IndUS Business Journal has selected Poddar as its Businesswoman of the Year for 2008. "I am so honored to receive this award," Poddar said. "Artech has grown tremendously over the years, and I am proud to have been a part of that growth from the beginning. I enjoy what I do and it has been a lot of fun watching this company grow over the years."

Poddar credited her husband, Ajay – Artech's executive vice president, with whom she co-founded the company in 1992 – and Artech's many employees with helping to build it into a globally successful enterprise. "Artech has grown organically over last 16 years," Poddar said. "In 2007, our revenues were about \$137 million globally, and this year we expect to bring in about \$180 million. We've had to revise our sales projections for this year slightly because of the down economy, but overall, the company is doing very well."



Poddar

While Poddar's path to the world of information technology was not a direct one, it was a route in which she dictated its course. Ajay Poddar had been working in the IT industry when he pooled together \$200,000 from friends and family to get Artech off the ground. At the time, Ranjini was attending Yale University Law School, but she still managed to devote between 10 to 20 hours a week helping her husband grow the fledgling company. It was hard work – Artech launched during a recession – but after more than a year of intense marketing efforts, the company landed its first client: the Port Authority of New York/New Jersey.

Not long after that, Artech snared its first private-sector client, General Electric Co., which led to other business. During those first few years, the Poddars ran an extremely lean operation. They kept their own salaries and Artech's operating costs low, and reinvested all company profits back into the business. As a result, they never had to seek outside funding sources for the company. This conservative approach to managing Artech's finances enabled the company to turn its first profit after just two years in operation. Since 1999, it has experienced sustained growth, with sales increasing from just \$16.5 million in 2003 to the projected \$180 million in 2008. Artech currently employs over 2,100 IT professionals in the United States and 14 other locations worldwide, including Indian and China, and its client list now includes more than two-dozen Fortune 500 companies.

Artech's rapid growth hasn't gone unnoticed. Most recently, Staffing Industry Analysts Inc. – a Los Altos, Calif.-based research firm that tracks employment and workplace trends – ranked Artech No. 17 on its "America's Fastest-Growing Private Staffing Companies 2008" report.

Poddar said that she deeply appreciates the recognition that Artech has received in recent years, and is pleased with the company's continued growth. But she is particularly proud of a joint venture that Artech formed earlier this year with Banasthali Vidyapith – a prestigious university for women in the Indian state of Rajasthan – that aims to provide Indian women with some of the best instruction available in software, hardware and communications technology.

The Artech-Dalmia Center for Information Technology opened in late January on the 850-acre Banasthali campus in Tonk, a district of Rajasthan. The facility, which has a stated objective of empowering women by providing them with cutting-edge technology skills, offers bachelor's and master's degrees in the IT field. Given that Indian women are considerably underrepresented in the country's IT industry, the program has already made an impact, according to Poddar.

"The Artech-Dalmia Center has definitely been a success," she said. "It has made it possible for more women to take classes and advance their knowledge in a field where funding didn't exist. As a result of this program, hundreds of women have entered the IT field, which puts them on a more even level with men.

"Women have traditionally been underrepresented in the IT industry, and so to see so many women who have graduated from the Artech-Dalmia program taking IT jobs, it is a very good feeling," Poddar said.

The partnership took root when the university approached Artech several years ago for a \$25,000 grant to help fund a scholarship program. Poddar was intrigued with the proposal, so she traveled to Rajasthan with her husband to meet with university officials and tour the campus. They were so impressed with what they saw that they decided to give the university \$250,000 to build the center and launch the program. The university pitched in another \$1.25 million to build the facility, bringing the combined investment to \$1.5 million.

The Artech-Dalmia Center represents a dream come true for Poddar, who is an adamant supporter of the advancement of women in education and business. She is active in several supplier diversity and IT-industry organizations and mentors other women business owners.