

# Beyond the Boardroom

By RICHA VARMA

Somewhere along her journey from dusty Allahabad to swanky San Francisco, Rashmi Sinha, the young Indian American CEO and co-founder of the Internet startup SlideShare, decided to live life on her own terms.

"I enjoy people. I like to build things. My job comprises all these things. I feel lucky that I make money doing things I love. But I also choose to do things that I enjoy. At many stages of my life, there were opportunities to make more money or to have a more regular work life. I always chose doing the thing that I enjoyed more," says Sinha.

SlideShare grew out of a realization by Sinha and her American techie husband, Jon Boutelle, that it was time to move business presentations and slide shows beyond boardrooms. Hailed as the "YouTube of PowerPoint presentations" on several tech sites and blogs, SlideShare enables users to upload presentations on the Internet. Anyone can tag, download and embed presentations into their own blogs and Web sites.

Based in San Francisco and New Delhi, SlideShare has "about 1.5 million registered users overall," Sinha says.

With an academic background in psychology, how easy was it for a person "who had never touched a computer while at Allahabad" to veer toward the Internet?

Sinha says she changed gears once she realized the slow pace of academia was not for her. "When I was at Brown University...it felt too isolated, too ivory tower. When I discovered the Web, and how you could build for it and constantly iterate, it seemed a far more exciting prospect than sitting in a lab doing made-up experiments on people," she says on her blog. <http://rashmisinha.com/>

Sinha earned a Ph.D. in psychology from Brown University in Rhode Island. During the first year, she also signed up for a course in computer science. Later, she did research in cognitive neuroscience at the University of California at Berkeley.

Deciding that she enjoyed practical problems more, she co-founded Uzanto, a web consulting company, and worked on projects for companies like eBay. Her first foray into products was with MindCanvas, a game-like software for customer research released in 2005. This experience eventually contributed to developing SlideShare.

Sinha's confidence in her work and professional colleagues was evident when she slept through the launch of a major feature of SlideShare and woke up next morning to realize that it was already generating "a bit of enthusiasm."

"When one founds a company, one wants to build a company that grows beyond oneself, to have smart, responsible people who take ownership. I felt that this had finally happened with SlideShare and it was a great feeling," she says.

Not content to be watching from the sidelines, Sinha says she wanted to do something about the fact that there are an embarrassingly small number of women, especially speakers, at tech conferences. "I think the situation regarding few women in



PRAGYA SINHA

## Rashmi Sinha

CEO, SlideShare,  
California.

**LOVES:**  
*Technology and the Web.*

**LIKES TO:**  
*Create things.*

**INSPIRATION:**  
*Parents.*

technology is true both in India and the U.S. It's striking to see product teams mostly comprised of men," she says.

So every Wednesday, SlideShare features women speakers on its homepage. "If you are a woman who speaks at conferences (or want to speak at conferences), please

upload your presentations to SlideShare and tag them "womanspeaker"...I am personally (and publicly) committed to highlighting it in every way I can," Sinha blogs. While tagging their presentations may not guarantee women a spot on SlideShare, it helps identify women speakers for everyone, especially conference organizers.

A regular speaker at tech conferences and universities, Sinha offers a 360-degree view of design that she acquired as she moved from academics to consulting and finally entrepreneurship. She constantly emphasizes "how designers need to avoid thinking too much and start taking risks."

"I realize that a startup is a marathon, not a sprint. I cannot afford to get burnt out. So I try to take time off so I can keep doing this at the same speed," says Sinha. She frets that she doesn't get enough time to listen to music, though she feels she watches too many movies.

Sinha says her vision for SlideShare is clear. "We made a decision early on that we want to change the way people share presentations and build a great company," she says on her blog. "I did science because I enjoyed it; I did user experience design because product design is fun. And I run SlideShare, because there is nowhere else I would rather be at this moment."

For her next career, though, she wants to write a book about strange things people do on social networking Web sites.

[www.slideshare.net/rashmi](http://www.slideshare.net/rashmi)

