

I Founded a \$1.7 Billion Startup for Small Businesses – Here's the Secret Every Entrepreneur Should Know

This as-told-to story is based on a conversation with Shanaz Hemmati, COO and co-founder of ZenBusiness, a \$1.7 billion company that provides an all-in-one platform helping small businesses become official, stay compliant, manage finances and more. Her co-founder is Ross Buhrdorf, who serves as CEO. The piece has been edited for length and clarity.

I always had an entrepreneurial spirit, but I never really thought about going off and starting my own business.

At the University of Texas at Austin, I studied computer engineering, starting with hardware design before pivoting to software engineering. I truly love technology, and especially software engineering, because you're coding to solve problems – I still love solving problems.

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My husband's an entrepreneur who's always had his own businesses. He'd encourage me to start my own business, but I was too concerned. Sometimes women can think too hard about doing something; that's what held me back from becoming an entrepreneur.

For women in male-dominated fields, it's important to seek out mentors who can help you from their experience, even if their journey looked different from yours. You can bounce ideas off them and ask them questions. Mentorship pushes you, but it also gives you assurance and confidence.

Over the course of my career, I learned so much, which helped me when I made the leap to founder.

"Small businesses are what keep the economy growing."

I first met my ZenBusiness co-founder Ross Buhrdorf when we worked at Excite.com, a web portal company founded in 1994. Several years later, I joined HomeAway, a vacation rental marketplace, where I stayed for 11 years until the company was acquired by Expedia.

Later on, Ross and I met up for coffee, and he started talking

about this idea of building something to help entrepreneurs and people who are starting small businesses. I was intrigued and excited. I'd always been passionate about that category in the market: Small businesses are what keep the economy growing and going.

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So Ross and I founded ZenBusiness in 2017.

When it comes to a fast-growing company like ours, we have so many things on our to-do list, but we don't always have the resources to get them done at the same time, so we have to prioritize.

AI has been one of those priorities. Everybody in business should be using it these days. It's a great tool that saves time once you get employees on board and using it based on their role and function. Our personalized AI assistant, ZenBusiness Velo, is included with every LLC formation and helps entrepreneurs start and grow their businesses.

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"It all comes down to this – people are at the center of any great company."

For a long time, I've had this mantra that's helped me succeed as a business leader: Be fearless, be ethical, be passionate.

Being fearless means recognizing that nothing is ever going to be perfect, but you just do it anyway. Being ethical means always being honest, to yourself, to your co-workers, to anyone. And being passionate is everything. Loving your work and doing the best job possible will help you progress in your career and build your business.

It all comes down to this – **people are at the center of any great company.** Anything you do is all about people, whether they're employees, customers or the community.

ZenBusiness puts this rule into action by hearing and supporting its employees.

For example, we became an early adopter of remote work. The company sent employees home when the pandemic hit, but as we continued to grow and hire more people, we listened to employees who said that they preferred working from home. Remote work gave them the chance to spend time with their families, cut down on commute hours and be more productive.

Related: A CEO Who Runs a Fully Remote Company Has an Unusual Take on Employees Starting Side Hustles: 'We Have to Be Honest With Ourselves'

"Maybe you launch as a side hustle to test it out."

All aspiring entrepreneurs should avoid the pitfall of thinking about a business idea for too long before they take action: Do it sooner rather than later.

You don't have to drop everything else you're working on to start. Maybe you launch as a side hustle to test it out. Talk to the people you're trying to solve a pain point for because those conversations will give you a lot of information.

Every day, you're learning something new, and being able to pivot fast can be the difference between driving your business in the right direction or not. There are always going to be surprises along the way. So remember, it's all about the people who are around you – it's all about the people you bring in to help you go through your business journey.

This article is part of our ongoing Women Entrepreneur® series highlighting the stories, challenges and triumphs of running a business as a woman.

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Image Credit: Courtesy of ZenBusiness. Co-founder and COO Shanaz Hemmati.

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