Yahoo’s Marissa Mayer on Selling a Company While Trying to Turn It Around

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The CEO talks corporate motherhood, shareholders with competing priorities, and the struggle to make good choices great.

The following is a condensed and edited interview with Marissa Mayer, CEO, Yahoo!

What got you interested in technology?
I went to Stanford and started my pre-med classes. After my freshman year, I went back to Wausau [her hometown in Wisconsin], and I realized that I was learning all the same things that all my friends who went to the University of Wisconsin-Madison were learning. We were all memorizing the same flashcards and had the same carbon atoms and molecules. I’m doing something much more expensive, so how can I really get the most out of Stanford?

On my way back that fall, I started going through the course catalog, and that’s how I found a new major, symbolic systems, which combines philosophy, psychology, linguistics, and computer science. You look at how people learn, how people reason, and ask a computer to do the same things. It’s like studying the brain without the gore.

You joined Google in 1999 as the 20th employee. Did it feel like a special place in those early days?
Larry [Page] and Sergey [Brin] are incredible thinkers. The arc that they had gone through in just a year, from being Ph.D. students to business leaders, was really impressive. The previous year, they’d been rollerblading around campus telling off other grad students who were bothering them.

I also interviewed at McKinsey, which is a great company. But I had some friends who went there, and they said, “Well, we give the presentations, and then we leave the room, and the executives make the decisions.” In the musical *Hamilton*, there’s a song, *The Room Where It Happens*. I just felt like at Google I could be in the room. Even if you fail, you learn so much by being where the decision is made.

> “?‘Could you work 130 hours in a week?’ The answer is yes”

What's the most important thing you learned from being part of those big decisions?
If you give smart people the same data, they end up coming to the same decisions. I really learned the importance of sharing information and transparency, and I tried to bring that to Yahoo.

The other piece that gets overlooked in the Google story is the value of hard work. When reporters write about Google, they write about it as if it was inevitable. The actual experience was more like, "Could you work 130 hours in a week?" The answer is yes, if you're strategic about when you sleep, when you shower, and how often you go to the bathroom. The nap rooms at Google were there because it was safer to stay in the office than walk to your car at 3 a.m. For my first five years, I did at least one all-nighter a week, except when I was on vacation—and the vacations were few and far between.

Wow.
My husband [the venture capital investor Zachary Bogue] runs a co-working office in San Francisco. He runs his company out of there and other startups cycle through. And if you go in on a Saturday afternoon, I can tell you which startups will succeed, without even knowing what they do. Being there on the weekend is a huge indicator of success, mostly because these companies just don't happen. They happen because of really hard work.

When you joined Yahoo as CEO in 2012, there were two challenges. One was declining interest in the company's products. The other was a financial engineering challenge that occurred when its stake in Alibaba was worth more than the core business. Was that a surprise?
I knew I would spend a lot of time trying to help Yahoo take its products and transition from desktop computers to mobile phones. I didn't know how much time I would spend studying things like tax law and forming an opinion on Chinese e-commerce.

Why was it so hard for Yahoo to go mobile?
There were moments in the early 2000s [when Yahoo was so big] that people didn't understand where Yahoo ended and the internet began. It's hard to transition mediums and end up with the same mindshare. Facebook is the dominant player, but even by their own estimates, they probably occupy only 20 to 25 percent of time spent on mobile. Media is just a lot more fragmented today.

You recently announced that Yahoo had agreed to sell its core internet and media businesses to Verizon for $4.8 billion. Why is that a good outcome for a company that once had such cultural significance?

We had shareholders with two different priorities. We have some people who owned Yahoo stock because they really cared about digital advertising and the internet and a possible turnaround there. And we had another set of stakeholders who owned it because they saw a lot of positive transactions that could happen with these very large, lucrative Asian assets. And we had duties to both as the executive team of the company. The Verizon acquisition is a way we can kill two birds with one stone.

What is it like to sell a company while you're trying to do a turnaround at the same company?
There was a time earlier this year when I was running the company, selling the company, bringing on new board members [after Yahoo had settled a proxy war with activist investor Starboard Value], while I had infant twins, and also a husband and a 3½-year-old son. Each of those is a full-time job.

There was a moment when someone said to me, "Wow, you might be the busiest person on the planet." In the Midwest, where I grew up, you shrug off a compliment like that and think a lot of people in the world are really busy, like President Obama. And then President Obama started posting YouTube videos for fun.

You gave birth to your first child shortly after joining Yahoo and had twin girls in December while the proxy fight row was brewing. How did you do it?
The company was not in a state where the CEO could go home for four to six months, so I worked my son into my daily life. For his first four months or so, I would just have him in the room when I was doing conference calls. He's like this little business baby. You start talking about revenue or negotiating an offer or a deal, and he immediately kind of understands it. The twins have been the biggest shock and surprise of my life. It was like winning the lottery.

Does it bother you that your parenting choices were criticized?
In my view, there's just entirely too much judgment over motherhood. There are some mothers who want to work; there are some mothers who need to work; there are some mothers who want to stay home; there are some mothers who need to stay home. One of the best pieces of advice I've ever gotten is there are always a lot of good choices, and then there's the one you pick, commit to, and make great. In my case, I don't really feel like I chose not to take a maternity leave; it was just a fact of life. I had healthy children. I had a company that needed me. I found ways to make that work.

Will you stay at Yahoo indefinitely?
I plan to stay. I love the company, and I want to see it go into its next chapter.

Where do you see yourself in five years?
I love design, I love artificial intelligence. I think that I built a really strong set of skills and experiences as a chief executive, and I really hope I get the opportunity to apply those skills. But I would never have a five-year plan. If I'd stuck to my original five-year plan when I was 18, I would have missed every great thing that ever happened to me.

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