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The Fortune of Misfortune: How Elena Ramirez Enriched Her Practice During Bankruptcy and Downsizing

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How do you enjoy a rollercoaster? By fully embracing every curve and losing yourself in the moment, of course. That's the approach Elena Ramirez took as a Silicon Valley attorney who had to navigate the technology market through its various shifts, turns, and competing market forces in the center of technology innovation and new business development.

Ramirez did a short stint before law school at the Macy's cosmetic counter, where she learned the importance of customer service. In fact, her sales associate training still sticks with her today as she works with her clients to solve their problems and provide practical and useful advice. As Ramirez astutely points out, "If you forget that the legal department is a service organization, you will miss the opportunity to shine. Be pleasant, be useful, get the job done well, make the sale, and move on to the next client. That's how it was done in retail and it works surprising well in a legal department too."

Ramirez, currently group counsel at Intel, is not fazed by changes. In fact, she sees them as welcome opportunities for growth, where she can perfect her substantive knowledge and customer service skills. During her tenure as a technology attorney at Silicon Graphics (SGI), NextTag, and Intel, she learned that changes are an unavoidable part of life. Embracing changes — personal, professional, industry, or market — is a key to professional success and personal growth. The rollercoaster of each position taught her invaluable lessons about the benefits of change.



SGI: How a company in distress due to market shift is an incubator for deep and wide learning

When Ramirez joined SGI, it was what she calls "a rock star of a company." Soon after, however, SGI experienced significant problems because the market was changing. SGI began as a giant in the supercomputing and graphics industry, manufacturing large supercomputers for governments and companies. As people began switching to smaller PCs, the market for supercomputers shrunk. Even as she survived numerous layoffs and contractions, Ramirez found a way to have a "wonderful experience." She explains, "As people left I picked up different experiences. All of a sudden, I was handling trademark, patent, international, and litigation matters, all of which were previously handled by specialists."

When Ramirez joined the company, there were many lawyers, paralegals and administrative support employees at SGI. Initially, she supported the IT and manufacturing business units. Each time the company suffered a layoff — about once per year — she would pick up a new area of responsibility, simply because no one else was around to do it. Just because a company has a smaller legal department, it does not mean that the legal questions stop coming. When two remaining attorneys absorb a workload that was previously carried by ten, they become jacks-of-all-trades. Ramirez explains, "Although it was painful to say goodbye to so many co-workers over the years through layoffs and attrition, I would not be in the place I am today in my career as a broad corporate generalist without all the experience I obtained through corporate restructuring. When your company goes through hard times, it provides the best legal experience you can get."

For example, the words one negotiates in a contract during good times show their substance and meaning when a client attempts to terminate the arrangement. Enforcing such a contract may be difficult, but the exercise provides valuable experience. Ramirez explains, "My advice to those

working in technology companies is to be willing to take on any kind of work, especially if it is outside your comfort zone. The skills you learn are never wasted and will probably lead to your next opportunity." Ramirez saw this firsthand when she filled in for SGI's European counsel by working a couple of weeks each month in SGI's UK office. There she learned about European and international law, knowledge that helped Ramirez get her next job at Nextag.

Over the course of her decade with SGI, Ramirez witnessed fierce competition and a shift in technology take the company from the cover of Time Magazine to Chapter 11 bankruptcy and eventually a liquidation of assets. She stayed with the company because of a deep respect for the general counsel, a belief in the technology, and an appreciation for the abundance of learning opportunities. She points out, "You learn a lot when a company fails. It created an opportunity for a broad experience and I was gobbling up everything that was thrown my way."

Nextag: How the corporate cuts and restructuring in a highly competitive industry can increase your business experiences and risk tolerance

After SGI, Ramirez moved to another industry and joined Nextag, a growing e-commerce price comparison website that had properties around the world, as senior international counsel. Although she was hoping for a less eventful career than her unpredictable decade at SGI, she found that working at Nextag would be another exercise in learning to embrace uncertainty. Competition by newcomer Google Shopping hit Nextag hard, and the company went through numerous cuts and restructuring. Ramirez ended up reliving many SGI-like experiences during her four-year stay at Nextag.

Again, she took this shift in Nextag's competitive landscape as an opportunity to broaden her original role from senior international counsel to deputy general counsel. As Nextag shifted from a staff of three attorneys down to just Ramirez and a paralegal, she took on many new legal and business responsibilities. Eventually, as Nextag's then-general counsel became the CEO, Ramirez had an opportunity to run the legal department and oversee broader business functions. Ramirez explains, "It was definitely a business in transition. And at some point, business and legal strategy became one. That is what happens when you are trying to survive as a company. Your risk tolerance goes higher and higher." Eventually, Nextag was bought by a private equity firm. The company was restructured once again and the legal function was eventually outsourced. Although Ramirez's time at Nextag was less than half the length of her time at SGI, she took the rapid changes and uncertainty as yet another opportunity for growth.

Intel: How a culture of rotation forces learning and professional growth

These days, Ramirez enjoys her position at Intel, which was SGI's former vendor. Unlike SGI and Nextag, Intel is a stable company. Ramirez, however, prizes Intel's abundant learning opportunities more than its stability. She was familiar with Intel's technology and was intrigued by the opportunity to work with a large legal department and many technology products. As Ramirez explains, "Intel is into everything — IOT, connected devices, drones, you name it. So, it took a while to adjust. It was overwhelming."

Optional rotations are Ramirez' favorite benefit at Intel because they provide opportunities to learn both legal and business skills. Rotations are encouraged in the legal department to cover a co-worker's sabbatical, for project specific growth opportunities, or longer term for two-year rotations at an international office. In fact, she sees herself staying at Intel for a long time, if not through the end of her career. "I recently volunteered to learn more about product security and it lead to amazing opportunities and experiences that I never had before. I can't imagine ever becoming bored with Intel," she shares.

Through her rollercoaster of a career, Ramirez has discovered something even beyond her wealth of substantive knowledge: the benefits of "perspective" walks. The walks clear her head, facilitate sustained concentration, and help her provide better services to her clients. She explains, "I picked up the habit of an afternoon walk during my particularly fast-paced time at SGI. I found that an afternoon walk was just the thing I needed when I felt overwhelmed by my work or faced a particularly tough opportunity." She found that the "perspective" walks lead to more clarity, less anxiety, and an abundance of creative solutions. She continues her "perspective" walk practice today at Intel as she embraces learning and opportunities that she has not encountered before.

Ultimately, Ramirez says, "All experiences are good experiences. And I would not trade my rollercoaster experiences for any other experiences." She also adds, "I love being a technology lawyer in Silicon Valley because I believe the intersection of law, technology and society is rapidly changing our lives. I hope to continue to be a part of the rapid changes here in the hub of innovation as I embrace all learning that comes my way as part of this experience."

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Olga V. Mack is a fellow at CodeX, The Stanford Center for Legal Informatics, and a Generative AI Editor at law.MIT. Mack shares her views in her columns on ACC Docket, Newsweek, Bloomberg, VentureBeat, Above the Law, and many other publications.

Mack is also an award-winning (such as the prestigious ACC 2018 Top 10 30-Somethings and ABA 2022 Women of Legal Tech) general counsel, operations professional, startup advisor, public speaker, adjunct professor, and entrepreneur. She co-founded SunLaw, an organization dedicated to preparing women in-house attorneys to become general counsels and legal leaders, and WISE to help female law firm partners become rainmakers.

She has authored numerous books, including *Get on Board: Earning Your Ticket to a Corporate Board Seat*, *Fundamentals of Smart Contract Security* and *Blockchain Value: Transforming Business Models, Society, and Communities*. She is working on her next books: *Visual IQ for Lawyers* (ABA 2024), *The Rise of Product Lawyers: An Analytical Framework to Systematically Advise Your Clients Throughout the Product Lifecycle* (Globe Law and Business 2024), and *Legal Operations in the Age of AI and Data* (Globe Law and Business 2024).