

"It's an empowering journey."

Sonali Aditya earns MBA through the My Cook Pathway

Sonali Aditya joined Cook in 2013 as a software developer at MED Institute in West Lafayette, Indiana. When MED shifted their focus to working on clinical trials for non-Cook companies, they relocated to another facility and Cook Research Incorporated (CRI) took its place. That is when Sonali shifted to CRI. In 2016, she became part of Cook's IT Shared Services, where she remains today, as part of the Workplace Workstream. This workstream handles many of the systems set up to "aid and abet" the employee experience at Cook—such as CookLearn, the iCIMS job portal, Dayforce, etc. In 2018, Sonali decided she wanted to pursue a master's in business administration (MBA). Read her story below.

Where did you get your undergraduate degree and what was your undergraduate degree in?

I am a computer engineer from India. I got my degree in '96, after which I worked for about a year. Then I came to the US, to North Carolina State University to pursue my Master of Science in Computer Engineering. Networking was the go-to thing in the late '90s, so I worked for a couple of network engineering firms. From there, I moved to storage and computing. Subsequently, I moved to West Lafayette, Indiana, because of my husband's job. I worked for



▲ **Sonali Aditya**, a member of Cook's IT Shared Services team at CRI, with her diploma from the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business.



▲ Sonali (left) with her daughter, Maya, and husband, Dev.

another seven years for an insurance company in Lafayette before I joined Cook. You can say that I'm an old hand at gathering requirements, writing software, testing and supporting it.

When did you decide to pursue your MBA? And why did you decide to pursue your MBA?

It's obvious that for me, on the technical side, the well runs deep. But I started realizing that I needed to know the business aspects that affect our profitability and our bottom line. That's when I realized that in order to be able to have a voice at the decision-making table, you not only have to be technically competent, but you also need to have enough business knowledge to know the levers that push a company in a certain direction.

For that, an MBA was the next logical step.

There is that underlying fear of not being able to succeed, but there is a tremendous desire to grow and prove that it's not too late. For that we need encouragement from one another. I have had so much encouragement from family, friends, people at work, and school that embarking on the journey to an MBA was a no brainer at that point.

– *Sonali Aditya, a member of Cook's IT Shared Services team at CRI*

So, I applied to a few places and the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business fit my needs. Primarily, because it is a very reputable (currently ranked at #1 nationwide alongside Wharton Business School) and rigorous program and, above all, it was an in-person program for part-time students. You would go in on a Saturday and you would take your classes in person. That was a big factor for me.

After I got admission there, my managers at CRI were very supportive and encouraged me to leverage the Cook tuition assistance program (the precursor to the My Cook Pathway initiative) in order to support my education.

I started in March 2018 and took three years until March 2021 to finish the MBA with Honors.

When you decided you were going to do this, what was your husband's reaction and what was your daughter's reaction?

As it happens, my daughter was then in high school and—this is also something I've learned from people around me at CRI—you have to be an example to your children and not just expect them to climb the mountain. So this was demonstrating to my child that it is very possible to be a mother, have a fulltime job as a woman in technology, and still go back to school in your middle age and come out with flying colors.

My husband is a professor, so he has always been very enthusiastic about education. I still remember his comment after I received the offer from Chicago, "I really didn't think you'd be able to do it—but I'm glad."

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How did you balance all of this?

I would say by keeping a very strict discipline and schedule. It didn't matter how much I had to work during the day, every night from 9:00 pm till 1:00 am was homework time. The only exception was Friday night, because my Saturday mornings started at 6:30 am—in order to drive from West Lafayette to Chicago. So, I needed more sleep such that I wouldn't fall asleep behind the wheel!

The initial few weeks and months were very hard. Eventually, you realize that everybody around you—both at school and at work are all stretching their boundaries—planning for a family, getting an education, raising their kids, and still doing their day jobs and helping their community. We are all trying our best. Open your eyes to people around yourself and then you know that you are not alone in your pursuit of success.

How hard was the shift—I assume there was shift—when the pandemic started? And how did you deal with that—because you couldn't be in class on Saturdays then, right?

I will say that the transition to online classes was a big adjustment for the first two months. For example, in an in-person class you can raise your hand and the professor can see it and call upon you. This happens very quickly. But when you're in Zoom and you're with 50 others, there is a discipline—you have to raise your hand virtually and then the teacher's assistant or the moderator will unmute you, you speak, and then someone else has to raise their hand to respond. So, dialogue is not as fast and the momentum is lost.



▲ Sonali on her graduation day.

It was hard, but I think we all realized that the pandemic was such a life-changing event, that we had to adapt. And I guess that change is the only thing that is constant, so we adapted to the new Zoom way.

It's a lot more work, less free interaction, but interaction nonetheless.

Chicago Booth allows us five years from the start date to finish—I was two years in when the lockdown started. I could have waited until classes were back in person, but I didn't want to pause and lose the enthusiasm and momentum.

Surprisingly there was an advantage to online learning in that I could take classes on weeknights, which until then were impossible since

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— Sonali Aditya

driving to Chicago on a weeknight for class was difficult. Looking back, the pandemic did present some opportunities and I am glad to have availed of them.

Which classes took you the most out of your comfort zone? What were the biggest challenges you faced in your coursework?

The classes on Entrepreneurship were a big pivot to what I had been doing and have observed in an organization over the years. Most new ventures are small groups of people with a great idea. At that point, one doesn't have a structured Human Resources department or a structured Finance department. So many things that make an organization click have all got to be started from the ground up. For instance, every other week the paycheck will get direct deposited to the bank—but there is a lot that happens behind the scenes to make that paycheck appear in your account.

Entrepreneurship classes actually showed me what you need when you want to start out. You have this great idea for a new service, component, or something—how do you make it from that point to where you get a paycheck coming out of it? It's not easy, it's not trivial, and I have tremendous respect for every entrepreneur out there—be it a mom and pop shop selling popcorn or **Bill Cook** starting Cook Medical.

How helpful was Cook's program?

As soon as I got admission into Chicago Booth and I told my supervisor and my leadership, they encouraged me to go ahead and apply for the tuition assistance. That was a program already in place that became a part of My Cook Pathway—and it was very helpful to me. Now as the program has evolved and matured, job architecture shows me the different ways that I can move my career forward.

So, I think that my completing the MBA and the maturity of My Cook

Pathway is a very nice merging of roads. I can leverage the opportunities that are out there better than I could have a few years back.

Do you remember when you found out you were done, that you had earned your MBA?

Yes. It was a bittersweet feeling, because you realize that you are at the end of a journey that really broadened your horizons. You learned so much and then you grew so much as you learned. You start wondering, "Am I going to continue my journey of learning? And how am I going to continue that?"

And then you are also looking at the other things, which are, "Oh my God, now I have from 9:00 pm to 1:00 am to watch TV!" You don't have the constant pressure of having to do homework. I have time to get more involved in community outreach programs that had ceased in these past few years.

How do you feel this experience has impacted you the most, both as a person and an employee of Cook?

That's actually a very good question—When I started I was one of the oldest in class. I was one of the most torn in different directions with multiple responsibilities. The one with the oldest (high-school aged) kid probably. I still did it. It shows me that if I want to do something, I can do it and I can achieve it. "Life's battles don't always go to the stronger or the faster man; sooner or later, the man who wins, is the man who thinks he can"

I think that it is true for most of us.

This is a special shout out to women out there who are juggling so many different roles—caregiver, breadwinner, mother, sister, daughter—so many roles and facets—take the time out for yourself. It's an empowering journey, and it will open your mind to so many possibilities.

I want to acknowledge my managers, **Mark Lowe** and **James (JR) McIntire**, and a big shoutout to **Jennifer Kerr**. JR helped facilitate this and I am very grateful for that. And Jennifer has always encouraged me to grow. She can see beyond your persona of an employee—she can see you as a human and all the struggles that come with being wife, mother, daughter, and everything else. I am full of admiration for her.

This is not just an empowering moment for me. It is a testament to the environment at Cook. I encourage you to go out there, stretch your boundaries a little, you'll be surprised at how much you can achieve.

• **Jon Hancuff** (*Jon.Hancuff@CookMedical.com*) is the manager of Global Content and Channel Strategy for Corporate Marketing and Communications.

Want to learn more about the My Cook Pathway program?

Contact your local Human Resources department for more information.

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