



Diversity

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A professional journey to the top: Anusha Thavarajah, FIA



CEO AIA, Malaysia

“I started out wanting to become a doctor but when I finished my A-levels I got a scholarship from the Malaysian government to study actuarial science. My dad was very keen for me to take the scholarship because he said that, as a doctor, I would never have time at home and actuarial science in the mid 80’s was very new. So, I took the scholarship and studied mathematics in Birmingham. During my second year I applied for an internship during the summer holidays. I sent out 50 applications and received 49 rejections.

The one positive response I had was from a pensions consultancy which had a very senior Malaysian at the firm; he sponsored me and ultimately became someone that I continue to keep in touch with. For 3 months I worked very hard so that I could apply for a work permit; I was promised that if I did well in my exams, the firm would offer me a full time position.

I spent three years in the pensions consultancy in Birmingham which gave me a solid foundation. I returned to Malaysia and switched to life insurance. I continued to do my exams and subsequently became Chief Actuary for an insurer in Malaysia. My ambition had been to be Chief Actuary, and I had attained that goal early in my career.

I then moved back to the UK and worked for the insurance arm of a major bank as a pricing actuary and finally returned to Malaysia in 2002 when I had my son. It was then that I joined AIA for the first time.

After a few years, I moved to become the CFO under a female CEO at ING; she was also a wonderful mentor. It wasn’t long before I started to get involved in a wider range of functional areas as my CEO was taking on greater regional responsibilities. I was made deputy CEO in charge of Operations and IT.

I re-joined AIA at an exciting time as they had just gone through an IPO and was intent on making transformational changes across the business. I was put in charge of Operations and Actuarial, and also supported the CEO regionally. We then acquired ING’s Malaysian operations and it was my responsibility to ensure a smooth transition during the integration process.

At every point, I wasn’t sure I could make each leap; I just made sure I did a good job. When students ask me what they should consider, I tell them not to think about the money, but the foundation that the qualification gives you. It’s structured and gives you support and belief from entry level all the way through that you can do anything.

The most important thing for an actuary is to have the right mindset to be able to manage people, adjust and convince people that you can do anything. My key





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message is to take the opportunities, do not worry, just do a good job and you will not fail. If you do it in the right way and give the best you can, no one will fault you. If someone challenges you to go to the next level – just do it. The whole journey is exciting.

There are a very high number of women in senior roles in Malaysia. In Asia, the support mechanism for women is far better. If I had been in the UK when I had my son, I probably would have had to stop working. I never lost touch with the industry. While much of these issues lie with the employer, my message to women in the UK is to try not to lose touch; use the CPD that is available to you online and try a flexible work arrangement if that is possible.

That said, when people have been away from the workforce, they have the ability to look at things differently. Career breaks give you a different perspective. I also like to hire people who have failed and then passed as they have demonstrated resilience. It’s not so much about technical knowledge anyway, it’s about your ability to communicate and motivate people. You also need to be open to accepting change and trying new things.”

