



# Pooja Sankar: Building the Piazza Collaboration System

Charles Severance

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**Pooja Sankar describes an online collaboration tool that's growing in popularity among engineering and computer science students.**

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**T**he Piazza online collaboration tool is quickly becoming a popular way to enhance student interaction and involvement in engineering and computer science courses. Piazza combines features from blogs, wikis, and threaded discussions, resulting in a system that encourages students to answer each other's questions and collectively build knowledge around course materials throughout the duration of the course. Essentially, the tool recreates the kind of interactions that small face-to-face study groups typically experience when they're covering challenging material in a course.

Piazza was built by engineers for engineers. I recently spoke with Pooja Sankar, the founder and CEO of the small start-up company that created the collaboration tool in Palo Alto, California. Visit [www.computer.org/computingconversations](http://www.computer.org/computingconversations) to watch the full interview.

## INSPIRATIONAL ROOTS

Sankar drew inspiration for Piazza from the issues that she faced as a young woman working on her computer science degree at IIT:

I did my undergraduate work as one of very few women in computer science in India's top engineering school. I studied at an all-girls high school until college. I wasn't even allowed to speak to boys, so when I went to college, where all my classmates were boys, I studied alone and felt very isolated and frustrated with having to do assignments and studying for exams by myself.

After completing her degree in computer science at IIT, Sankar came to the US, got an MS from the University of Maryland at College Park, and then went to Stanford

to pursue her MBA. She started to realize that many other factors led to students feeling alone, isolated, and unable to participate in meaningful discussions with their fellow students to help their learning:

When I went to Stanford Business School for my MBA, I realized that even with technology like laptops and high-speed Internet everywhere, many students ended up studying by themselves in their dorm rooms, and that the feeling of isolation is actually pretty prominent among many young students. So Piazza is meant to simulate the real face-to-face discussions that I witnessed in my undergrad days but couldn't partake in because I was too shy.

As Sankar listened to the entrepreneurs who worked in Silicon Valley and came to her Stanford MBA courses to speak, she decided

that she wanted try her hand at a start-up:

Midway through my first year of my MBA, I took an entrepreneurship class at Stanford, and one thing that the people who came to speak to the class said was to think about an idea that you're passionate about. For me, that idea was about how can I help students, particularly women, studying science and engineering subjects feel less isolated?

## FROM SMALL TO BIG

Like all good start-ups, Piazza began in a garage:

So that summer between my first and second year in business school, I moved in with my brother and his family, worked out of their garage, and built the first prototype of Piazza. I hadn't done any Web development until then, so I picked up a book on Ruby on Rails. I had never written a line of HTML or CSS because all I knew was server technologies like C, C++, and how to use GDB. I picked up that book on Rails, built a site in 10 days, and launched it to a class in fall 2009.

It was pretty clear that Sankar had created something special, as the nascent Piazza product was quickly adopted by engineering classes at Stanford and then outside of Stanford:

We grew to three classes in January 2010 and then 10 Stanford classes in fall 2010. That grew to 65 classes in spring 2011, and to many professors I didn't even know, which indicated to me that something was working, and students and professors were liking it. I contacted professors at Berkeley, MIT, Princeton, and Harvard, and within a month, we had 20,000 students at these five schools using Piazza.

At this point, Sankar decided it was time to get serious about moving Piazza forward and raised a

little over \$1 million of seed funding from Sequoia Capital. But Sankar's philosophy did not focus on growing as quickly as possible because she was committed to working with her early customers to make sure the product was right:

I definitely lean toward slow growth. I truly believe in creating value first, not in getting caught up in numbers. In fact, in February 2010, it turned out that the founder of TechCrunch was sitting next to me on a plane, and when he said that he would love to write an article about me, my first knee-jerk reaction was "no" because I knew that would cause lots of people to want to use Piazza. At that time, it was in its nascent stage of product development. Saying "no" was a good call I think because that whole year of 2010, I didn't care about numbers or how many students or professors we had—all I cared about was my handful of professors and students that I could sit with and learn and watch and observe.

## WORK-LIFE BALANCE

The year 2012 was pretty busy for Sankar and Piazza. The number of schools and students using the tool continued to grow, and the start-up raised a second round of \$6 million dollars of capital. Adding to this success, Sankar's son Arjun was born in July:

I'm very fortunate that I live with my husband's parents. They understand that I need their support to be able to run a company while being a mother and that both are very important. I want to be a mother—I want to bring children into this world and raise them, but at the same time, I believe in the company that I have built and the impact that it is having on students and teachers, and I want to continue what I've been doing.

Because Piazza is a small company and has always taken a long-term view of its growth and

product development—and the fact that it has a very supportive staff that feels like a second family to Sankar—she's been able to find a balance between all the elements of her life. But in addition to balancing time between her family and company, Sankar is very careful to make sure that she has time for herself as well:

One thing I really like to do is to be in another place by myself for a while, whether it's working out or going on a long walk. That allows me to pull myself away from the weeds either for Piazza or for my son. The Stanford Dish is on a mountain right behind Stanford. I heard that Steve Jobs used to go there, and a couple of other great people from whom I derive a lot of inspiration go there a lot. I like to walk at the Dish a few times a week.

**B**y keeping her life in balance, Sankar is more effective with the time she spends on each of the important elements of her life. By avoiding an all-encompassing sprint toward product growth or an excessive emphasis on revenue, Sankar and Piazza can remain focused on improving the educational experience of young computer scientists and engineers. 

*Charles Severance, Computing Conversations column editor and Computer's multimedia editor, is a clinical associate professor and teaches in the School of Information at the University of Michigan. Follow him on Twitter @drchuck or contact him at csev@umich.edu.*

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