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THE PRICE OF SUCCESS

**BYLINE:** By Alison Bass

**BODY:**

IT IS NOONTIME ON A RAW, WINDY DAY, but within the peach-toned walls of the restaurant Maison Robert, all is lightness and warmth. About 50 members of The Boston Club, the city's foremost association for women business leaders, are gathered for lunch. And they are about to dig into their baked salmon when guest speaker **Ilene Lang** steps to the podium.

Anticipation hangs in the air. For Lang is that rare success story, a woman whose name is on everybody's short list for top technology executives. In just two decades, she has risen to the highest levels of several technology companies and is perhaps best known for building AltaVista into a popular search engine. She is, in short, a woman who seems to have accomplished it all.

"I'm 57 years old," begins Lang, stylish in a charcoal-gray jacket and black dress pants. "And when I think about putting some perspective on my career, I must say it's been a long haul." The eating stops. Several women put down their forks at this unexpectedly downbeat note.

Lang describes how, as a "child of the '50s from the Midwest," she traveled east to attend Radcliffe College and came face to face with the hard realities of sexism. "I was very good at math, but those guys at Harvard told me I wasn't smart enough to get into math," she says, "so, lucky for me, I majored in history."

She graduated in 1965, "the first year that Harvard accepted women into its business school. It was an atmosphere," she continues, "where women were explicitly excluded from just about everything." Even during an interview for a job as a children's librarian, Lang says, she was asked if she had a boyfriend. She lied, got the job, and a few months later told her boss she needed the weekend off to get married. " 'I guess you're going to quit,' " she quotes him as saying, adding, "And when I said my husband was a student, and I wasn't planning to, he asked me what kind of birth control I was using."

The audience gasps. Lang resumes, telling how she later earned a master's degree in business administration from Harvard and within 20 years had broken through, vaulting to vice president status at Lotus Development Corp. and Digital Equipment Corp. and becoming the chief executive officer of several Internet start-ups. Along the way, she raised three children, often bringing

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them to work when they were small. "I felt if I took a maternity leave in this tech ie environment, I wouldn't be able to go back, and that would hurt other women," she says. "I told my boss, 'Don't worry, John, my babies never cry.' What a joke!" she says, and a number of women nod appreciatively.

By the time her children were in grade school and junior high, Lang says, she was working "round the clock" and often traveling overseas. And then she drops her bomb: "Over that time, my husband and I split up. He felt I was married to my job." Lang looks small but resolute at the podium, and her dark eyes are wet and luminous behind her glasses.

Complete silence envelops the room. The baked salmon is forgotten, and the eyes of every woman in the audience are riveted on the dark-haired truth-teller in front of them.

From Silicon Valley to Boston's Fort Point Channel, white men continue to rule the high-tech roost. Women entrepreneurs received only 5 percent of the \$37 billion in venture capital poured into start-ups in 2000. Nationwide, only 7 percent of the 500 largest private companies have women at the helm. And according to a recent study by the White House Council of Economic Advisers, women make up only 29 percent of workers in information technologies. Despite high-profile exceptions like Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina, women are largely absent from high tech's senior management.

**Ilene Lang** - Radcliffe '65, Harvard Business School '73 - stands out like a beacon in this hyper-male universe. Her story is that of a pioneer: She was in the vanguard of women breaking the glass ceiling and has the scars to show for it. "For those of us who felt like the first or only woman in many situations," she says, "you know that we always had to do a better job than anyone else."

Indeed, at Lotus, Lang says she was known as "a glass breaker," not only because she broke through the glass ceiling but also because she was willing to speak her mind. Her colleagues would say, "She'll break the glass for us and make all the enemies," Lang recalls. "I'm impolitic, but the problem often gets solved."

It was at Digital in Maynard that Lang really put some executive noses out of joint by insisting that the once-mighty computer behemoth could save itself by embracing the Internet. As vice president of connectivity software, Lang was among the first to grasp the potential of a little-understood piece of code cooked up in one of Digital's research labs. It was named AltaVista, and with a talented team behind her, she almost succeeded in making the powerful search engine and Web site the first major gateway to the Internet, instead of Yahoo!

If AltaVista had been spun off from Digital in 1997, as Lang and others had urged, it would have netted Digital's shareholders millions of dollars in additional stock value and possibly saved Digital from being sold. But top officials at Digital, who Lang says didn't understand the Internet and didn't take the only woman in the executive suite very seriously, persuaded then-CEO Bob Palmer to fold AltaVista back into the company. A year later, the entire company was sold to Compaq.

Lang's role in AltaVista cemented her reputation as a bellwether in technology; she became a sought-after prize for investors looking for an experienced Web-savvy manager. After leaving Digital in 1997, Lang became CEO of Essential.com in Burlington, an on-line service that steers consumers through the thicket of deregulated utilities and energy bills. She hired top management, brought in investors, and helped prepare the start-up for going public. Six months later, Essential founder Akhil Garland, a man almost 20 years her junior, decided he no longer wanted to share a percentage of the company with Lang and

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asked her to leave. "I thought we were partners, and he thought I was his employee," she says dryly.

In 1999, Lang was tapped to head Individual.com, a Burlington-based customized service that provided users with daily briefings of the latest business and technology news. In eight months, Lang transformed Individual into a top Web portal for business and technology news. At its peak, Individual rivaled thestreet.com and WSJ Interactive in the number of registered users.

But her moment of glory was brief.

It is 10 a.m. on a sunny day in early December 1999, and almost all of Individual's 43 employees are crowded into the company's conference room. **Ilene Lang** is running on four cups of coffee and three hours of sleep. But despite the deep circles beneath her eyes, she appears relaxed and smiling, her usual upbeat self.

"Never a dull moment around here, huh?" Lang quips to the staff members spilling around her onto chairs, window sills, and the floor.

And then she makes the announcement: NewsEdge, Individual's parent company, is being acquired by RoweCom, a Cambridge-based firm that handles corporate subscriptions on line. Dick Rowe, the 65-year-old founder of RoweCom, views the merger with NewsEdge, another news service provider, as a "perfect B2B [business-to-business] fit." But he sees no room for Individual, which provides a similar consumer service for business professionals for free and made its money from advertising and affiliations with other Web sites. Rowe, she explains, had been instructed by his board to "stop the cash outflow to Individual."

But Lang has managed to talk Rowe into letting her try to sell Individual. And then she puts her trademark spin on the story. "My assessment is this: While it looks very scary at the moment, it is actually good news. We can now do a deal that the investors want to do and do it quickly. Since Friday, I have talked to four companies, and each and every one of them has expressed strong interest."

When Lang ends the meeting 90 minutes later, Individual's employees disperse to their lavender-gray cubicles largely content in the belief that Lang has the situation under control. As Jim Wilson, a veteran programmer who worked first at NewsEdge and then Individual, later says: "That was one of the things I've always felt was good about Ilene - when she told us something, it felt like she was leveling with us. The rumor mill around here is pretty good. So it was funny to listen to the rumors and then hear Don McLagen, the founder of NewsEdge, or other executives talk. It looked like they were trying to cover their ass. Ilene comes in and says that if we don't get sold, the company will be folded, and you'll go back to NewsEdge. It wasn't like it was all rosy and all rah-rah-rah. It's refreshing to hear someone tell you what you think is the truth."

What Lang hadn't told her troops, or had quickly glossed over in the meeting, was how difficult it would be to find a suitable buyer by the deadline that Rowe had given her. She had exactly three weeks, until the end of 1999, to find an angel for Individual. Her performance that day and in the weeks that followed, as she hunted desperately for a buyer, was vintage Lang. Her employees knew exactly what she was up to, and her air of nonchalant confidence, as she strolled in and out of the office in her quilted coat of many colors, a cellphone glued to her ear, gave them hope.

Growing up in a middle-class Jewish household in Chicago, the oldest daughter of a frustrated small businessman who sold plastic parts and a homemaker, Lang

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had learned early on that if you believe you can do something, you probably can. She had ended up at Radcliffe because at the age of 10, her best friend announced that she wanted to go there. So then and there Lang decided that's where she would go, too. (She got in. Her best friend didn't.) A year after her graduation in 1965, her boyfriend and soon-to-be husband, Edmund Lang, helped her get her first job as a technical writer for a computer consulting firm in the Boston area. They married in 1966, and her parents, Conservative Jews who were heartbroken that she was marrying a Catholic, almost didn't go to the wedding.

For Lang, the '70s were a blur of going back to school, having two children, and starting the first do-it-yourself picture-framing shop on the East Coast. It wasn't until the early '80s that Lang was talked into returning to high tech, with a job at a new

MIT

spinoff known as Symbolics. She ended up as vice president of software and marketing there a few years later, helping the business grow from \$1 million in revenues to \$120 million.

After a few more stints at other start-ups, she joined Lotus in 1993 as vice president of international product development. "I never had a career plan," Lang admits. "I took what opportunities I had. Many times I had to put together a resume that didn't look too random. I got really good at the spin of the message; that's how I could get in the door."

Once in the door, Lang would quickly earn the respect of superiors and subordinates alike not only for her shrewd grasp of the business, her vision, and her willingness to work punishing hours but also for another, possibly rarer trait. "Ilene is someone you can trust; she has a sense of integrity that is lacking in a lot of people I've met over the years," says Abe Hirsch, vice president of business development at Natural Microsystems, who worked with Lang at Symbolics, Digital, and Individual.

Just before Christmas 1999, Lang delivers on her word to employees of Individual. She has found a buyer for the dot-com - Winstar, a telecommunications conglomerate based in New York City that is expanding into the Internet and is willing to sign a letter of intent on Christmas Eve. Despite some last-minute nitpicking by Winstar executives - "They're all lawyers," Lang later explains in disgust - the deal closes less than two months later. In retrospect, the \$11 million sale would look like a brilliant move on Lang's part - most of Individual's employees are able to cash out lucrative stock options as part of the deal, and barely six months later Internet start-ups that had been much more highly valued will be dismantled and sold for nothing.

But in the weeks immediately after the acquisition, some at Individual have second thoughts. Almost from the start, there are signs of friction between the dot-com and its new parent company.

Then the RoweCom-NewsEdge merger, the putative reason for the sale in the first place, tanks; it was never popular with Wall Street, and major stockholders finally lead a revolt, quashing the merger. Lang is exhausted and feeling increasingly frustrated by Winstar's reluctance to include her and her management team in the decision-making process. "I have been so stressed since Thanksgiving," she says one afternoon in March, checking her e-mail on the laptop in her corner cubicle.

Her right foot jiggles nonstop under the desk. "I've had a stiff neck for months."

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Two months later, Lang is summoned to the Manhattan headquarters of Winstar and informed that her services are no longer required.

Winstar executive Ruth Shields wants her to resign that day, but Lang makes it clear that she will only leave on her terms. It takes another three weeks for her attorney and Winstar to negotiate a severance package. In the meantime, her managers begin walking out the door, one by one, and others follow after her departure.

"Ilene was very well liked and respected here, and one would think they would realize that when Ilene left, a lot of other talent would, too," says Kathy Greenler, vice president of marketing for Individual. "I can't make up my mind as to whether they're sinister or stupid. In some respects, I think they're just really naive."

As seismic as Lang's departure feels to many Individual employees, to Lang herself, it is a minor blip. Nothing, she says, compared with the emotional earthquake she experienced when she was working to take AltaVista public and her husband suddenly announced he wanted a divorce.

Lang had known for years that her marriage was in trouble, but "there was this sort of agreement that we shouldn't talk about it," she says. "We were leading very separate lives."

Just as Lang's career was taking off, her husband's was slowing down. A Harvard MBA himself, Ed Lang had started and sold several successful technology networking companies. By the early '90s, he was semi-retired and looking for new horizons. This role switch was fortunate in one way: As Ilene began putting in longer hours on the job and traveling more, Ed became immersed in their children's lives. The couple also had a part-time au pair who helped ferry the three kids to activities before and after school.

Even so, Ilene's work schedule took a toll. She would come home at 8 or 9 or 10 p.m., exhausted and often jet-lagged. "I'd be really tired, too tired to listen, to deal with all the hubbub and the mess," she acknowledges. "I think I felt that a lot of times it wasn't even my house anymore."

But she hung in there. When Lang couldn't make it home in time to help with homework, her two daughters would fax her a copy of their papers, and she would edit them while still at the office. She helped with the car pool and was on the phone with her children several times every day, helping them to organize their increasingly busy schedules. Both daughters had become speed-skating champions in high school; introduced to the sport by their father, they are currently training for the 2002 Olympics.

Lang organized every one of her children's birthday parties, but there were times when she missed important events at school. "I remember one school interview I missed," she says. "Pe nelo pe was interviewing at Winsor [a private girls' school in Boston], and both parents were supposed to be there, and I couldn't. Officials at Winsor weren't happy about it, but Pe nelo pe was accepted anyway."

Now that he had more time on his hands, Ed Lang wanted to recapture the closeness the couple had felt in college. "We were best and closest friends," he says. But as children and careers intervened, their priorities had diverged. "For me, a spouse was right up there, and then children; work was not a high priority," Ed Lang says. "Ilene was doing fabulously well, and work was a top priority for her."

One summer evening in August 1996, **Ilene Lang** coaxed her husband into going out to dinner at a small restaurant near their home in Arlington. It was near

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the end of a rare week's vacation for Ilene, and she was concerned about her husband's frame of mind. "He seemed checked out; he wasn't paying attention to anything. I kept trying to talk him into going on a trip, just the two of us, but he had all these excuses." Finally, over a glass of wine, Ilene recalls saying: "Things have been a mess around the house. I think we've got to talk about what's going on." And Ed said, "I want a divorce."

In retrospect, Ed Lang blames himself for not bringing up his growing sense of alienation earlier. "Relationships need attention, and if one of the partners isn't available, maybe the other partner needs to be more adaptable in getting things dealt with" is how he puts it. He also blames society, for not showing men a way to handle role reversals. "The patterns and support haven't been developed to allow women to become high-level executives," he says. "There are patterns for men to achieve that kind of success, and there just aren't the same kind of expectations for them to be involved around the house the way women executives are expected to."

**Ilene Lang** has a similar take. "He was very supportive of what I did; it was just that emotionally he couldn't handle it," she says. "We should have been in counseling, but he didn't believe in it. It's not that he was jealous or anything else like that. He was lonely. He was."

Her older daughter, Sarah, who missed the US Olympics speed-skating team in 1998 in a tie breaker, took the divorce hardest. "She was angry at me, because her Daddy could do no wrong; she and I have always fought," Lang says matter-of-factly. "The middle one [Pe nelo pe, who is attending Skidmore College] just ignored everything; as far as she was concerned, this was none of her concern, and it wasn't going to change her life."

Her son, Edmund, a sociable boy just entering seventh grade, seemed equally unfazed by the breakup. But his reaction was simply delayed by four years. **Ilene Lang** was in California on business when Edmund, now a 16-year-old boarder at Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, called her on her cellphone. He said he wanted to withdraw immediately and take a medical leave of absence, Lang recalls. She flew back and drove up to see him with her former husband. It turned out that Edmund had stopped going to classes or writing papers. He was failing in history, English, and Spanish.

Lang took charge. She called her administrative assistant at Individual to say she would be out for the week and she spent the time with her son, making sure he got to class, helping him write his papers, taking him out to lunch. And getting everyone at Exeter involved. By Friday, she was back at work, breathlessly sharing the story with colleague and friend Liz Gallese, the vice president of news for Individual. "We've written a paper about For Whom the Bell Tolls and one on Leopold and Loeb. . . . Good thing I know what a topic sentence is," Lang said, laughing. Suppressed panic made her voice shrill. "The poor thing, he had just fallen to pieces."

Lunching at the John Harvard Brew House earlier this year, Lang is much more relaxed, content with her new post-corporate lifestyle. After leaving Individual, she had insisted she would never again take a corporate job: "I feel I've been let out of jail. I don't think I could ever go back inside." And so far, nothing has happened to change her mind.

She sits on the boards of three high-profile companies: Adaptec Corp., a software company; Fact City, an Internet database publishing start-up; and Zoots, a cleaning company. She has also become involved with a venture capital firm and is consulting for several Web start-ups. And for the first time in years, she has time to spend with her children. She regularly shoots over to

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Sarasota Springs, New York, where both Sarah and Pe nelo pe, 23 and 20, are training for the Olympics, and she spent the winter helping Edmund prepare college applications. He is doing fine, she says, and has been accepted by the University of California, Santa Cruz, for this fall.

Individual, of course, is no more. Crippled by mounting debt and a cratering stock price, Winstar has laid off 29 of the dot-com's 30 remaining employees (the exception is one employee who maintains Individual's skeletal Web site). And Winstar itself has announced Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Lang is worried about former employees who now have to job-hunt in a difficult market.

But she professes no regrets about her decision to sell Individual. As Lang told the members of The Boston Club months earlier, she doesn't "do regrets." But there are things in her own life that she might have done differently, and over a lentil salad at the Brew House, she muses about those turning points.

She would have worked harder on saving her marriage. She would have tried to be more cognizant of the choices involved in pursuing a high-level corporate career and having a family at the same time. "I thought, I really did, that we could have it all, do it all, in a way that our mothers or women in the '50s never thought possible. We thought we could, but we learned later that we couldn't." Lang mentions a recent Fortune magazine article listing the top women managers in corporate America today. "You know these women's secret? Five of them had husbands at home, and the others are either not married or did not have children.

"Most men still don't have to make these kind of choices," Lang says. "When high-earning women are married to high-earning men, and they have children, it is the women who stay at home."

Such pressures, she thinks, may explain why there are fewer women today going into high-tech careers than there were in the mid-'80s and why an increasing number of young women, according to an Arthur Andersen survey, are not interested in corporate careers. Climbing the corporate ladder just doesn't appeal to them the way it did to a young **Ilene Lang** 25 years earlier.

Even so, Lang worries that young women today have to live up to expectations that she never had to. "There were no expectations of us, none; we were breaking new ground," she says, running a finger around her coffee cup. "Today, the expectations for women are so high that I think more and more of them feel like failures, because they don't have it all. But they shouldn't feel that way, because they can't have it all." Lang fixes her lunch companion with an intent, almost imploring gaze: "Do you know what I mean?"

**GRAPHIC:** PHOTO, 1. Eric RothCover photograph of **Ilene Lang** by Lane Turner / The Boston Globe 2. **Ilene Lang** in Radcliffe's Fay House boardroom. Women in the vanguard, she says, "always had to do a better job than anyone else." 3. **Ilene Lang**, left, and Karen Swain in 1974 at their Cam bridge do-it-yourself framing store, an East Coast first. / Thomas Landers / The Boston Globe

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