Making Connections:
Unorthodox Route Leads Meena Elliott to the Top in Wireless Communications

With a history of doing the unexpected, Meena L. Elliott, JD ’88, EMBA ’95, has sought out and excelled at a variety of opportunities, culminating in her current position as senior vice president, general counsel, and secretary at Aviat Networks—a half-billion-dollar, global wireless communications company headquartered in San Francisco.

To understand Meena Elliott’s somewhat unorthodox career path, one needs to appreciate her love of learning and problem-solving, which led to her decision to study law. As a pre-med student at Northwestern University pursuing a biochemistry major, she discovered that a career in medicine was not for her, opting instead to dissect the classics.
She then looked to law school, not as a means to a profession, but as another way of learning and analyzing information. “Law school,” Elliott says, “helps strengthen your analytical abilities and objective thinking. You’re really geared to do almost anything.”

Her law degree led to several what she calls “generalist” positions. None has proven more challenging, nor interesting, than the role she assumed shortly after joining her current company. In March 2006, Elliott began by working for Harris Corporation as general counsel for the Microwave Division. Ten months later, that division merged with direct competitor Stratex Networks, Inc. to form what is now Aviat Networks. Aviat is a leader in wireless communications and specializes in advanced IP network migration, which it then sells to businesses and governments in 135 countries.

Although Elliott had previous experience with mergers, “this was a very different challenge,” she explains. “It’s not like you’re purchasing another company and you’re adding a division on a product line. That’s actually much easier.”

Elliott describes that time as “a lot of fun because you’re bombarded with a multitude of issues from diverse subject matters with everything requiring a rapid resolution.” From an operations perspective, there were many complicated issues to consider: consolidating different product lines; merging IT, manufacturing, and billing and accounting systems; and meshing two completely different corporate cultures.

The legal department, Elliott explains, is “where people look for objective advice.” Her department essentially became the calm in the storm.

A mere 10 months into Elliott’s tenure, Aviat filed the merger documents and went public in the same week. Two years after joining the company, Elliott was named general counsel. In subsequent years, the legal department would continue to face challenges, including Aviat’s issuing a financial restatement, class action lawsuits, multiple changes in senior executives, and dealing with an activist shareholder—all in addition to ongoing business operations.

Today, Elliott advises on all legal issues, including transactions, divestitures, securities, compliance, intellectual property matters, and other complex litigation. As corporate secretary, she spends significant time on corporate governance issues. She also implements Aviat’s business ethics program.

Elliott recalls that her role as a generalist actually began when she joined Eveready Battery Company, now Energizer, as in-house counsel in St. Louis, right out of law school. She quickly rose to director of international counsel, having handled joint ventures in Turkey, the Czech Republic, China, and India.

During that time, she also pursued an Executive MBA at Washington University. With the support of the general counsel and the CEO (mirroring his own background), she moved into brand management, where she led cross-functional teams.

By then it was the late 1990s, Silicon Valley was booming, friends had joined that arena, and she thought “I’d like to experience something completely different.”

Making another bold choice, she left the more than 100-year old company and, instead of turning left to the start-up haven of California, she turned right and headed to Washington, D.C. to join XM Satellite Radio. With fewer than 50 co-workers, Elliott describes her first year as “a mad dash trying to do as many things as we could possibly get done, which included launching two satellites.”

However, with the fallout of 9/11 and a faltering economy, the company experienced a slow growth period. Budgets were cut, and the business environment changed completely. Assessing her next career move, she consulted her mentors at Energizer, who advised “as long as you’re in D.C., why not learn the business of D.C.”

She applied for a job at the U.S. Department of Commerce and was hired as chief counsel of the Minority Business Development Agency. Elliott’s big takeaway from the experience was that it gave her “an eagle’s eye view into the workings of the executive branch.” Her next move was to Harris (Aviat) where she remains today.

Through the many twists and turns, Elliott comes back to a few founding principles. She stresses the importance of finding a mentor and is passionate about the benefits of a legal education. “You can do anything with it,” she observes. “You learn a lot besides theoretical and analytical thinking—you increase your self-assurance, confidence, and independent thinking.”