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# Hemispheres

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## Up to the Task

As CEO of Taskrabbit, Ania Smith helps people help people

By Sahar Khan • Illustration by Lucie Birant

T Ania Smith was 12 years old and spoke no English when she and her family immigrated to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, from a small town in Poland. Her parents worked two jobs each to make ends meet, and Smith did her part, as well: She had a paper route at 12, was flipping burgers at 14, and started waitressing at 16. “Sometimes people are afraid to talk about how important it is to make money, but if you grow up in low-income housing and on food stamps, it becomes really important,” says Smith, 48. She attended the University of South Dakota on a scholarship, but it wasn’t until she enrolled at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania that she started considering goals beyond her next paycheck. “I could actually start thinking about what I’m passionate about, what I’m curious about, and what I think I’m going to be good at,” she remembers.

Smith set her sights on e-commerce, working her way up through Expedia, Walmart, Airbnb, and Uber Eats. In August 2020, she became the CEO of Taskrabbit, the online platform that connects people with “Taskers” who can help with chores such as home repairs and furniture assembly. (Ingka Group, the parent company of IKEA, acquired Taskrabbit in 2017.) Smith’s timing was surprisingly good; business boomed during the pandemic, thanks in part to lockdown-induced home improvement projects, and she oversaw double-digit year-over-year growth in 2021 and 2022.

Now, with Taskrabbit celebrating the 15th anniversary of its 2008 founding and continuing to launch in new markets worldwide, Smith is driven by a need to give back. She enjoys mentoring first-generation kids like herself, who she says often find it difficult to leave their families and go off to college. “It’s been interesting to lean on my experience,” she says, “and try to help others in this space.”

**On pandemic silver linings:** “Initially, business dropped quite a lot, because a lot of what we do is help people around the home. We have Taskers who go into your home to help you with things—which is exactly the opposite of what was the guidance at the time. But then, as people realized they were going to stay at home for long stretches of time, many people decided that they wanted to fix up their home, and Taskrabbit was right here to help them do that. So the pandemic provided many, many tailwinds for us. There were also many people who changed jobs and came to our platform to become Taskers. With both of those factors, we were able to expand our business substantially.”

**On helping people earn a meaningful income:** “Our Taskers make, on average, well over \$40 an hour, which is great in this type of economy. I sometimes think back to my early years, and I wish that platforms like Taskrabbit were around then, because I know for my parents it would’ve been much easier to have the flexibility and

be able to, in some sense, hustle. A lot of immigrants want to work hard, and it’s often hard to find jobs. At the time, in Sioux Falls, it was really hard to get all the hours you wanted to make ends meet. I love the fact that, in some small way, Taskrabbit helps people make a meaningful income.”

**On leadership:** “For me, it’s about surrounding yourself with the right people, forming the right team, and empowering that team to make decisions and take risks. Often, especially as companies become bigger, it’s easy to become more risk-averse and only focus on things that you know will work. Once we start doing that, it becomes much harder to find the things that will work. You can’t find them unless you’re taking risks.”

**On understanding people’s motivations:** “Before I started [my career], I wish I would’ve known how people are motivated by very different things. Figuring out what drives people is really important; it took me a long time to learn that lesson. I thought everyone wanted to do what I wanted to do—work hard and just move up the chain and be super-ambitious—but it turns out that’s not true at all. Figuring out what motivates people helps me be a better leader, because I can work with the different motivations to make sure that those people get fulfilled at work and outside of work. Knowing what makes them happy and how they define success helps build a better team.”