



Life in VC – An Interview with Raquel Chmielewski, Associate, Columbia Capital

June 5, 2006

Q: Briefly describe your background and experience

~ In 2004, I joined [Columbia Capital \(www.colcap.com\)](http://www.colcap.com), one of the major communication services / telecom venture capital shops in the U.S. The firm was founded in 1989 and we currently manage about \$2.0 billion in total assets after closing our Fund IV earlier this year. Half of the Partners focus on communications technology and the other half concentrate on communication services. I believe this provides a good balance when evaluating and discussing potential deals.

Prior to joining Columbia Capital, I served as an analyst in JPMorgan's Financial Sponsor Group, where I focused on numerous product, M&A, and buyout transactions spanning several industries. Before switching to sponsors, I had been a member of JPMorgan's Telecom, Media & Technology group, concentrating on various large cap media and cable clients. I have also held internships at the Federal Reserve Bank, Boston, in economic research and at Lehman Brothers, London, in sales & trading. I graduated from Boston University with a BA/MA in Economics and a Minor in Japanese.

Q: How has the experience of working in venture capital compared to your initial expectations of the role

~ My experience has been inline with what I expected and better. Every venture capital firm is different; they run the gamut culturally as well as with their sector, stage focus, and business model. There can be a decent amount of traveling for due diligence, conferences, and board meetings. Buyside is still a project driven industry, with work intensity increasing as a deal closes. In contrast to buyouts, deals here are usually more collegial and co-investing in the norm. And, finally, in VC you meet a lot of accomplished entrepreneurs and have the opportunity to talk with interesting people about new trends, products, services, and ideas.

Q: What are your responsibilities as a Venture Associate?

~ Associates at Columbia Capital are an integral part of the investment process and are paired with a Partner on every new deal or existing portfolio company. On average, half of my time is spent diligencing new deals; this includes making on-site trips, reference calls, sector analyses, sensitivity models, and the final investment memo. The other half of my time is spent working with our current portfolio companies. Partners at Columbia take board seats on each of our companies and it has been invaluable to attend these board meetings as an observer. Our current companies have been quite active with M&A transactions, debt raises, and equity fund raises.

Additionally, at times the management teams may be so lean, busy, or new that associates will step in and run some of the processes. This might include taking ownership of the company's financial or operating model or running point on some of the lender, hedge fund, banker, or legal developments.

Q: Where do you see yourself in 5- 10 years?

~ Professionally, I intend to leverage my experience and skills and either stay on the investment side or remain in the high growth telecom, technology sector but in a development role in a startup or dynamic company. I also still hold an affinity for Japan and international opportunities so perhaps an overseas-focused, high tech/telecom startup or fund will get woven in at some point! But at whatever point of my career, it's important to me to continue to learn, build my network, and evaluate opportunities as they come.

Q: What are your thoughts on the Mid-Atlantic region as a hub for technology and venture capital?

~ Having come from NYC and Boston, I was impressed. There was more than I expected and a lot of talent and diversity in the DC and Mid-Atlantic area. Also, there is a tremendous amount of entrepreneurial spirit. Besides the large and active telecom companies that are headquartered here (Nextel/Sprint, Verizon/MCI, America Online, XM Satellite Radio, and Primus), there are research and engineering driven firms, like the CIA, government contractors and think tanks. These firms help propel R&D and ultimately augment startups and businesses throughout the D.C., Virginia, and Maryland area. That helps with the entrepreneurial pool and work force. Overall, the area continues to be strong in legacy investment areas such as the Internet, security, telecom and wireless.

Q: A commonly discussed topic is the lack of women in VC, what are your thoughts?

~ In VC and buyouts, I do not see a lot of women at the Partner level. But overall I do see an increase of talented, experienced, bright women entering and staying in buy-side positions. It will be interesting to see if they continue on this career path. The more women that go for associate positions, or go to b-school, or stay in the market in a professional finance or investment role the more they help build that diversity and role model visibility. And assuming one has the relevant skillset and qualities, diversity in additional networks, ideas, and backgrounds often strengthens a deal team or a fund.

Q: What advice do you have for those individuals looking to break into venture capital?

~ There is no one path to breaking in; I've worked with VC professionals that have various backgrounds, some have been operators, entrepreneurs, engineers, bankers, attorneys or journalists. One way to start a dialogue is to target shops, get to know people, and get on their radar screen. The rest often comes down to luck and timing in order to be what they are looking for when a position opens.

Q: What advice do you have for those Companies looking to receive funding from Columbia Capital?

~ One of the best ways to get the attention of a venture capital firm is to come in through a referral (1 or 2 degree of connection). It also helps to have people on your team that have been successful in previous start-ups or raising capital as they may have investor contacts. Also, get your business plan out there. You might attend contests, trade shows, drop off your (well-developed) business plan, and talk, talk, talk. Talking with VCs and others might spark something; Partners may have an existing portfolio company that could benefit from working with you.