President and CEO, SHI International

Thai Lee has an extraordinary ability to take the long view. After earning a degree in economics and biology from Amherst College, she returned home to Korea to gain business experience. While her native country was not a friendly environment for a budding female entrepreneur, she made the best of the situation in order to meet her goal of saving enough money to attend business school.
Similarly, when Lee applied to HBS, she set forth several ambitious objectives: to gain experience in the corporate world in her 20s; to launch her own company by 30; and to have a child by 40. Lee met—and exceeded—each of these goals. After cutting her teeth at Procter & Gamble and American Express, she took over a failing business and gradually built it into a remarkably successful $5 billion tech company, while parenting two children (now 15 and 10).

In 1989 Lee and her then husband purchased Software House, a small, unsuccessful software sales company. Within a year she had changed the name to SHI International, reflecting her global ambition, and the company was doing $1 million in revenue. As a new CEO, Lee again operated with a long-term perspective, gradually building a company where people wanted to work, creating hundreds of jobs, and fostering a community of employees who worked together to meet the same goal: to exceed customer expectations.

Under Lee’s leadership, SHI has grown into a top-ranked provider of IT products and services. With an industry-high of 99 percent in customer retention, SHI is one of the largest privately held firms in its field. The company employs more than 2,300 people at its headquarters in Somernet, New Jersey, and in 28 offices across the globe. The firm regularly receives awards and accolades—including partner of the year from Dell, Microsoft, and VMware—and Lee was named Ernst & Young’s Entrepreneur Of The Year in 2012. In a field generally dominated by men, SHI is the largest minority- and woman-owned business in the United States.

Lee’s ability to grow the business is matched by her commitment to her employees. She has 19 direct reports, and the average tenure of this inner circle is 15 years. What keeps people at SHI is Lee’s belief in letting others do their job—she empowers employees to do their best work. At the same time, her hands-on approach sets the stage. Before SHI expands into any new market, Lee runs the new operation to ensure that it gets off on the right track. She frequently meets with customers to make sure she understands their needs. She answers her own phone and books her own travel. “Thai has always worked hard. That’s just who she is,” says Celeste Lee, her younger sister whom Lee persuaded to attend the Harvard Kennedy School. Celeste now sees her sister’s skills in action regularly in her position as SHI’s vice president of new business development.

Working with Celeste reinforces Lee’s strong commitment to family. She keeps business trips to a minimum, sometimes flying to California—and back—in one day to be home to prepare her daughter’s breakfast. When her older sister, Margaret, was diagnosed with late-stage cancer, the doctors suggested hospice care, but Lee refused to give up. Researching treatment options, she found doctors at Johns Hopkins who performed complicated surgeries. Today, Margaret is cancer-free, and much of Lee’s philanthropy focuses on improving outcomes for cancer patients.

Thai Lee’s mother and brother remain in Korea, but the three Lee daughters, each of whom went to graduate school in the United States, make their home in America. Although her father passed away last year, his presence is very much a part of Lee’s life. “My father was a tremendous influence on all of us. He was a man of the world who believed in the power of education,” she reflects. “Each of us has followed in his footsteps to achieve our own version of the American dream.”

“In the 1980s, there were virtually no Korean women in business or entrepreneurship.”

**TIMELINE**

1958 Born, Bangkok, Thailand
1980 Earns BA, Biology and Economics, Amherst College
1985 Earns MBA
1985 Joins Procter & Gamble
1987 Joins American Express, Corporate Card Division
1989 Purchases Software House
1993 Appointed Board of Trustees, Amherst College; first female president, Society of the Alumni
2011 SHI International opens new headquarters and cloud computing data center
2012 SHI International ranks 104 in Forbes’ America’s Largest Private Companies list
2012 Named Ernst & Young’s New Jersey Entrepreneur Of The Year, Technology
2013 SHI International reaches $5 billion in revenue