

## WOMEN TO WATCH

# A technologist who went outside the technical box

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COPY EDITOR

It sounds cliché to say that Fanny Mlinarsky — computer programmer, electrical engineer, entrepreneur and founder-CTO of Azimuth Systems — has come a long way since she was a little girl with an interest in electronic gadgets.

In fact, it's the literal truth.

Mlinarsky, a native of Odessa, Ukraine, in the former Soviet Union, immigrated with her family to Israel, to France, and to New York before coming north to Boston.

Twenty-seven years after arriving in the United States, she founded Azimuth Systems Inc., an Acton maker of wireless data communication testing products, having helped create a number of successful startups along the way.

"I always wanted to start a company, but that can be difficult to do because whatever idea you might come up with, you look around and find that somebody's already done it," Mlinarsky said.

As it turns out, that wasn't a problem. Mlinarsky joined the wireless LAN race with an idea for a standardized, repeatable test platform to measure performance of and ensure confidence in wireless networks.

"There are a lot of problems with testing wireless equipment," Mlinarsky said. "We refined it into something very different from the testing equipment available."

Azimuth's W-Series WLAN Test Platform, which shipped in September, has proved popular with customers and was named "Best of Show" in Test/Measurement at Jupiter Media's Wi-Fi Planet Exhibition held in San Jose in December.

But for Mlinarsky; it almost didn't happen.

Having arrived in New York at 15, she steered away from science when she entered



Columbia University three years later. But her curiosity got the better of her, and after her first computer science course, she was hooked. She earned degrees in computer science and electrical engineering and headed to Wall Street as a programmer.

When her interest in software faded, Mlinarsky headed to Teradyne Inc. in Boston as a hardware designer.

Subsequent experiences with a string of startups — among them a fledgling Chipcom Corp. — helped her evolve from hands-on engineer to adept businesswoman, having gained experience in strategy, decision-making, industry standards, writing and presentation. Her last stop, at Scope Communications, helped sow the seeds of Azimuth.

"Scope was my best exposure to the outside and to customers, which is what you have to do," she said. "A lot of technical people might have a problem with that. But just talking with

### Fanny Mlinarsky

**Current employer:** Azimuth Systems

**Position:** Founder and chief technology officer

**Years at current employer:** 2

**Best thing about your work:** "Seeing the products I designed being used in the field and solving problems."

**Last job:** Agilent Technologies; Scope Communications

**Hometown:** Odessa, Ukraine

**Education:** B.A. electrical engineering, and B.S., computer science, Columbia University

the folks who might be using the system is a very important part."

When Scope was acquired by Hewlett-Packard and spun off as Agilent Technologies, she took over as general manager and later set off on her own.

"I spent a few months investigating and looking for a market because I wanted to make sure I was getting involved in a technology that was solving a problem, rather than coming up with a solution and then trying to find the problem."

When she settled on LAN testing, she landed \$5.8 million in funding from Kodiak Venture Partners and Northbridge Venture Partners — and at a time when funding for startups was virtually nonexistent.

"Getting started in a down market is an advantage because you can get some top people," she said. "We have a super team that we've built here."

Her home team includes her husband and son, and while she makes sure there's time for both her 3-year-old son and her 2-year-old company, she said, "It's like having two babies."