

# Interview with Olga Kapustina



**Olga Kapustina (ChE  
BE '17) CEO and  
Founder of ELKE**

## **How are you, Olga?**

I'm doing well, thank you! It's been a busy few months. I've been consulting, launching a new venture, and moving to the Upper West Side from Brooklyn.

## **Please, briefly introduce your startup company and what your current involvement is.**

This summer, I'm launching my new company ELKE, where I'm both founder and the person handling everything from design to operations. ELKE focuses on creating swimwear, activewear, and intimates without the synthetic materials that typically dominate these categories. After 20 years in the apparel industry, I wanted to create clothes that are actually healthy for our bodies and the planet—truly biodegradable pieces made from natural materials that you can trace from creation to end-of-life. I call it "designing backwards"—starting with what happens to a garment when we're done with it, then working our way back to how it's made. My goal is to partner with much larger brands, develop new technology that can work with single natural fibers, and ultimately be acquired by a company that can

implement our innovations on a global scale.

## **How did it all start?**

I have been in the apparel industry for over 20 years. The idea for this company came from a personal frustration with the industry's addiction to cheap synthetic fibers. The market is now infiltrated with cheap, poor-quality materials that are harmful to our health, do not biodegrade, and cannot be recycled because most garments are now a blended group of materials between synthetic and natural.

I'm a huge lover of the outdoors and being active, but there isn't one company out there doing "nature" well. It is all predominantly plastic. It's a strange concept to me that we would walk into pristine natural environments, including our own bodies, and be dressed head to toe in plastic.

From an engineering standpoint, it is remarkable what we have been able to accomplish as far as the speed and efficiency of textile and garment production. I think approximately 100 billion garments are made annually at this time, and approximately 60 billion are thrown away with only about 1% recycled. This is an astronomical jump from 30 years ago and a huge ecological burden on our natural resources. My frustration has been this idea that we can create and engineer without ecological limits.

The way we have seen industry tackle this problem has been with development of new materials and some recycling technologies, but it has acted only as a bandaid to the larger problem that output is just too enormous to tackle with cheaper, novelty materials, recycled fibers, or recycling facilities.

I love the idea of designing backwards—seeing the end of life first and designing that way. Bringing back machines that can work with single natural fibers, reengineering knitting and stitching techniques that can create the stretch that we need without the use of nylon and elastane. This will take time and a lot of collaboration and testing, engineering things the old-fashioned way. Dare I say slower and "less efficient."

## **What's the next goal that you are working toward?**

We're currently focused on launching. That involves prototyping, branding, website development, and developing key partnerships and collaborations to help with the launch. I'm reconfiguring supply chains due to new tariff regulations, but I am a big proponent of making products locally here in the US and would love to see manufacturing return to the states in some capacity. Especially from a sustainability angle, collaborating with US suppliers as much as possible. With growth and funding, it would be amazing to redesign modern machinery that currently relies on synthetic fibers.

The end goal is, of course, to grow and potentially be acquired by a larger company that would benefit from the systems created with ELKE and can easily integrate them.

## **Any advice you have for our undergraduate students who want to become entrepreneurs?**

Being an entrepreneur is hard. You need to really understand yourself and decide if it's the type of lifestyle you want. You don't have a set salary or set hours, so it requires a lot more discipline than you might think and a lot more mental resilience because everything is in flux all the time, and all the wins and losses are on you. Additionally, you will probably need to keep your day job for a while until things get moving.

I started my first company when I was 23 before I ever had any real serious job or work experience. I was very lucky that it took off and was successful. But I was too young and inexperienced to handle the down cycle. It was the best thing I have ever done and the worst thing I have ever done.

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I'm starting my third company now(which is really an extension from my second), and I don't have the same time or energy I did as a 23-year-old. Pulling all-nighters at 23 was easy. It would kill me now. Time management with kids and family makes starting a company much harder, so if you are curious about entrepreneurship, start when you are young but definitely get at least some corporate experience beforehand to make connections, build a network, and learn from people older than you. Don't stay there too long, though, because you will get comfortable with a paycheck.

I was so involved with every aspect of my business that when things were chaotic, it was important to reallocate the workload and just focus on what I do best. I was delusional into thinking I can handle it all and do it well.

I wish I had learned how to raise money. It's an art form in itself and very important. Every engineering department should have a class on how startups raise capital and when to do it.

Don't be too attached to your company. I think that was my mistake when I was younger. I never intended to sell it off, and I should have.

## **Anything else you would like to share?**

I'm deeply grateful for the foundation CCNY provided. The diverse perspectives, intellectual rigor, and practical problem-solving I was exposed to there continue to influence my approach to business challenges. I'm always happy to connect with current students interested in entrepreneurship.



Photo Credit: Lanna Apisukh