

Driven to Innovate



Rebecca
Wanta

Becky Wanta was recently named senior vice president and global chief information officer for North America for Best Buy. Prior to that

she served as global chief technology officer for PepsiCo, a position she landed after spending her career in working with IT in a variety of organizations. She took some time to answer a few questions about the role—and **IMPORTANCE—OF INNOVATION** in IT, and in the enterprise.

Becky Wanta has spent her career integrating innovation into major IT organizations. As she takes on her latest challenge, she remains focused on the importance of being innovative.

NOW Magazine: Let's take a brief tour of your background, before you landed the very high-level positions at PepsiCo, and now Best Buy.

Becky Wanta: I've been in technology for about 30 years, starting out in the Department of Defense as a senior systems engineer and then moving into aerospace. I was then able to leverage my IT experience into the financial services world, not only managing IT, but trying to solve problems for the business.

I took over as the head of technology for The Money Store as their Chief Technology Officer; and later, was the global chief technology officer for Wells Fargo. I then joined the Feld Group, and was the engagement Chief Technology Officers for Southwest Airlines and WellPoint Health.

In short, I've been leading IT organizations and had the opportunity to be a transformation change agent for at least 20 of the last 30 years.

NOW: What have you found in common in all of these organizations?

Becky Wanta: Well, I haven't found anything in common in these companies *per se* given the different industries. However, the one common denominator I did see within these various different industries was the state of information technology. That said, I put in place a common direction and strategy for information technology that has always been standards-based and headed toward an open systems direction.

NOW: By Open Systems, do you mean the term that a number of the enterprise vendors were kicking around a couple of decades ago?

Becky Wanta: Yes; today, they call it enterprise services-oriented architecture, but in the early years, we always called it open systems. The idea was, and is, that we need to be really driving away from

proprietary answers and toward very loose, discrete coupling amongst the layers of the technology stack. We then must be able to qualify and certify products that we can use to extend the capability of our business partners.

NOW: CISCO springs to mind as being associated with the term Open Systems. Along with this, of course, is the idea that “the network is the computer.”

Becky Wanta: Yes, when John Chambers (CISCO) first said it years ago. It was a profound statement, and I think he was absolutely right on track. I was already in the field then, and that’s been pretty much what I’ve been driving towards as well.

From my perspective, it’s always been about how do you deliver information into the hands of the decision-makers, so that they can drive business decisions immediately rather than after the fact? Well, to do that, you need a network approach, which means you need a standards-based architecture that can do that kind of stuff well.

NOW: And if you’re looking at this open systems philosophy and approach, it begets the question of innovation. With open systems, you tend to have communities of

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developers, users, and technology companies working to improve things. Would you agree with that statement, and if so, what role has innovation played for you in solving specific challenges?

Becky Wanta: Well, innovation’s the name of the game at the end of the day, right? I’ll give you an example. When I first started this journey, we still had the holy war going on between BSD 4.3 Unix and Unix ATT System V. There are always such challenges with openness.

That said, I’ve always liked the openness of the Unix operating platform in general. The strength of an operating system is in the applications that port to it—it’s heavily reliant upon an innovation agenda in terms of, having those products come to market atop your architecture, so that you can actually deliver that value to the business.

The mindset in a case like this is that it has to continue to move, especially at the operating system level, to be able to run these different new capabilities. Because the big question how do I take innovation—how do I weave it into the

fabric of the way I do business, so that I enable my business to continue to do “blue ocean” (defining its own new markets and competitive landscape) kinds of things?

NOW: OK, since you brought it up, let’s talk about blue oceans a bit.

Becky Wanta: Well, “Blue Ocean Strategy” (note: a book authored by INSEAD professors W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne in 2005), makes some great points about innovation and even predictive business, actually. As a business leader, you must seek blue oceans, where you can define the next market that you’re going to play in, and potentially dominate. The contrast is with red-ocean markets, in which you already have strenuous competition.

NOW: How can our audience of enterprise IT managers and architects take this concept and make it work for them?

Becky Wanta: So developing a transaction integration tier, for example, can lead a company to new, blue-ocean opportunities. I’m not talking about an app server—to which this is often compared—but something far more innovative. A transaction integration tier that really merges the business process, events occurring internally and externally to the business, enables



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predictive business. It gives companies the chance to put in the right architecture, because you really want to enable that innovation agenda.

NOW: So that's a specific example. How about generally speaking?

Becky Wanta: In my view of the world, it's incumbent upon IT to keep their eye on the future in terms of patterns and trends, and to put the right core infrastructure and architecture solution in place that enables the business to continue to innovate.

Companies that are on the move—that have a heavy growth agenda—have got to innovate. And the only way to innovate is by being aware not only of what's going on around you in terms of business events, but being able to harvest all that you're collecting by way of event management. You need to be able to look at information and say “OK, we should be looking at this area or that area. Here is a gap that we should be going into and building a business case to go into that.”

Computers aren't smart enough to do this on their own. They just process faster, right? So what I'm talking about is creating more of a central nervous system that provides that dynamic ability. The business can then become very resilient, and can dynamically respond to change within their markets, thus creating new, “blue-ocean” markets.

NOW: In terms of innovation, what's been your experience in focusing on business processes and performance of business processes, rather than just the technology?

Becky Wanta: I think that's the biggest gaping hole we've got right now. The one thing you're not seeing as a trend and a pattern is the marriage of the business process to the information. You know, there's no need in a company for IT if there's no partnership with the business. IT is supposed to be the enabler. So the net of success in IT is the ability to partner with the business! 🟡



Quick Takes

If I hadn't gone into IT, I would have gone into:

“psychology, which I was originally began studying in college. And of course there's a lot of psychology involved in working with organizations to develop and deploy their enterprise IT infrastructure!”

An IT organization will fail every time if:

“it is not partnered with the business.”

I want to throw a vendor out a window when:

“they don't listen.”



AD—HCL