

# Teaching People About Technology

Laurie Benson Helps Firms Fill It Needs As Ceo Of Anacom Information Systems

Wisconsin State Journal :: CAPITAL REGION BUSINESS JOURNAL ::  
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Thursday, November 1, 2007  
Interviewed by Nathan Leaf

Q. Could you talk a little bit about some of the issues you face in hiring in the IT sector?

A. First of all, we have three corporate strategies and one of them is to attract, retain and develop exceptional employees. ... We've tried to keep our heads up beyond our local market. We're working with the industry and customers to always be open to "Hey, are there interesting people we should be talking to?" Now, there's a term for that. It's proactive sourcing. But to us, it's more than a discipline, it's really something that we believe in so strongly. And from that, you have to be open to the possibilities that come up along the way. So many companies that have IT workforces are concerned. For example, many of our customers today are facing the fact that about half of their workforce is going to retire or be out of the workforce in the next five years. That's huge.

So we're not going to get anywhere by hiring each other's employees. We've tried to get involved in efforts to connect students. We have proactively gotten involved in recruiting customers of ours to take on student interns. That's in the middle schools, high schools, colleges and MBA programs. ... Some of our most talented employees have come from internships. And they help us go back and recruit on campuses.

Q. How did you go from a nursing major to CEO at Inacom?

A. I always say that it's important to have goals and plans but be flexible. My career is an example of that. My father was a veterinarian so I was always interested in medicine. I thought that would be a great place for me to insert myself to make a difference. You cannot go wrong having a medical background. It just helps me look holistically at the employee's world, my customer's world.

I sold insurance while I was in college, and had fun doing that. That was my only experience in sales. When I was working for the Red Cross at the bloodmobile I was approached by the branch manager of Xerox . She had donated blood that day and she had said "You would make a great salesperson. Why don't you come and interview?" ... They were doing a pilot to hire people with no business background. So I interviewed and got hired and had a wonderful eight-year career at Xerox starting out as a salesperson. Then I hired and trained all the salespeople in Wisconsin and ended up running the branch here in Madison.

Then I was approached about selling Wang computers. And I thought "That sounds kind of interesting." Thus, this company was formed. The decision to go into this was really a natural evolution of building on experiences I had along the way. ... and I've discovered that it's more natural for me to be a businessperson than a health-care provider.

Q. What was your vision for the company when it first began?

A. If you wanted to buy a PC back when we started this company, do you know what you had to do? You had to go to a retail store and buy it. At that time, the only people who were technically savvy were the people who understood mainframes and midrange systems (that were more powerful than personal

computers). So this was not a natural fit. Customers knew their businesses but they didn't know what to do with a PC or even if they needed them.

The vision that we had was that we were going to make it easy for customers to engage technology. Because that technology, if used correctly, was going to give them information to make good decisions about their business. So what products we sold or how we packaged it, that's changed over the years, but that vision was very powerful, very clear and really, unyielding.

Q. What convinced you back then this would be a successful business since a large percentage of the population was not using computers?

A. There's still people today who have made a personal commitment not to touch a computer, but they're in the minority. Our goal wasn't to try to convert the masses. It was to go with those early adopters and help them. We went where there was an open door and then built on that and provided tools and resources. It's very interesting because in those days IBM was certainly the best known for its technology and the introduction of the PC. If their salesperson wanted to go on a call with us, we had to have a special letter of permission.

That's how new this idea was to have an outbound sales force that goes to the customers where they live and work. It was the exception. If you wanted to sell the products you had to have a retail store. We had to have 3,000 square feet of space dedicated to people coming to us. But that isn't how we started. And because of my experience at Xerox I understood this outbound selling as did my partner. So, both of us said let's go for it.

Q. How has that model changed over the years?

A. Companies like Dell that sell direct. It sounds like it's a better deal and it sounds like the way you want to go. And a lot of small and medium-sized businesses say, "Gosh, we can do this independently." But they don't know how to put everything together. And so it's gone full circle where there was a shift toward buying direct and now it's come back.

Every manufacturer today is saying the only way we can grow is to reach the small- and medium-sized companies. ... The group that really grabs onto this can only be reached by a personal relationship with a local provider. We'd really like to think that we helped advance that model by serving on the industry boards for the major manufacturers and being the voice of the customer and saying, "If you really want our business, don't give us hand-me-downs from enterprise accounts. We need our own products, our own solutions."

Q. How would you describe most of your clients?

A. The things I'm going to say to you don't have much to do with technology. The clients that we have are standouts in their fields. They have strong corporate cultures. They have a high priority on core values and how you do business. Not just how much business you do.

They have an openness that they will share their business goals with us so we understand what's important to them. We do best when our values and cultures line up so that the expectation is to do great things together. ... Inside of that, there's technology needs and we better darn well be expert at it because they don't have time to bring in people who are doing things they can do for themselves.

So this has caused us to become very focused. We specialize in voice over (internet protocol) technology where you bring voice and data together. We specialize in storage systems. Who doesn't have challenges figuring out how to store all of this data? And the third thing is the Microsoft suite of offerings. Designing, planning, implementing, creating applications for them. And providing training. ...

Early on in our business, in 1990, our people came to us and had just delivered a lot of equipment to a school and they weren't excited. They said, "We've left all this and the teachers don't know how to use it." And that was really the birth of our training business. One of the things that we do that sets us apart is we're one of the largest training providers in the country. We train IT professionals to support their own businesses.

Q. You put a premium on being a good match with your clients. What happens when you run into a potential job that doesn't match well with Inacom?

A. What we say is, "If we give you a yes, it is a strong yes. If we tell you no, it is a strong no." We are not even tempted to take on work (for which) we can't do a great job.

Q. What is an example of something that would make you say no?

A. Unix projects. That's not our forte. In fact we have school districts that have that in their environment so we would tell them. We know who has a good reputation in that area and we have lots of contacts through our experience. Where they would like us to, we're happy to introduce them to someone we think will do a great job for them as well. And we walk away from that quickly. ... I'm most proud of our people when they say no. That says it all. It shows me how committed they are.

Q. What does the future look like for the IT industry?

A. I see the IT community really blending into an overall business structure where it's more seamless and it's just a part of everything. For example, Harvard just announced that they're not going to have separate computer science courses. Technology element will be in every discipline. How cool is that? I mean this is the way the world is advancing. And I think that it is exciting but it won't be a particular type of technology. It will be how we integrate the technologies that exist.

Laurie Benson

Chief executive officer of Inacom Information Systems Age: 54 Hometown: Milton, Wis.

Family: Married, one stepdaughter Education: Bachelor of science in nursing from UW-Madison (1975).

Experience: Sold insurance in college, worked at an American Red Cross bloodmobile: spent eight years in sales at Xerox, chief executive officer at Inacom since 1984.

About Inacom: With about 1,800 clients and 140 employees, the Madison-based company is expected to reach \$75 million in revenue this year, up from \$65 million in 2006. Inacom was founded in 1984 as More Than Computers by Laurie Benson, Gary Hoffman, and Loren Mortenson.

<http://www.madison.com/archives/read.php?ref=/wsj/2007/11/01/0710260202.php>