Paula Rice zigged and zagged her way to the IT C-Suite up a path that probably doesn’t look like it would have ended there. She started typically enough, graduating from the College of Business at Colorado State University with a degree in computer information systems. And she took the obvious first step in her first job out of college as a programmer analyst, then applications development manager, and eventually the director of IT operations at Advanced Energy, a global engineering company that makes control systems.

But from there it was all zig and zag. Taking a break from IT for a while, Rice was actually a production line supervisor managing union employees at a beer brewing plant. She eventually went back to tech, but this time in a sales capacity, managing several of Microsoft’s customer-facing programs and eventually becoming a “voice of the customer” advocate at the software giant. Then it was a return to Advanced Energy, this time to run a business process reengineering initiative for their sales and marketing organizations. From there, she did a stint with HP in its Customer Experience & Quality group.

Rice felt a calling back to her IT roots, and left HP for a job as the director of IT at Animal Health International, a large distributor of animal health products based in Greeley, Colorado. This put her back on the path to the C-Suite, and Rice now works as the company’s vice president of IT.

Her journey away from IT provided Rice with a profound customer focus that shapes the values she brings to her role as the senior IT executive in this billion-dollar company. Animal Health International has to manage relationships with more than 1,000 manufacturers and a supply chain of more than 75,000 products, so its SAP ERP system is at the heart of what Rice must keep in top shape. But every day she worries about the technology needs of Animal Health International’s 1,000+ employees—her customers—and what they need from IT to do their jobs well. With her extensive background in customer experience, Rice is working to provide key performance indicators (KPIs) that reflect a user perspective of IT as well as the more traditional operational indicators that populate most IT executive scorecards.

Animal Health International has a people-oriented culture that’s built on long-term customer and supplier relationships. As the Internet transforms traditional B2B interactions, Rice—not unlike other IT executives—is looking to the cloud as a way to manage the need for agility, incubate technical innovation, and commoditize services such as email. She’s also looking to change other C-Suite perceptions from seeing IT as a cost center to looking to IT as a contributor to top-line revenue through investments in data mining, business intelligence, and online services.

What was it like for you personally when you were first made VP-IT?
When I was asked to step into the role of VP-IT, I went through a wide spectrum of emotions. I was thrilled to achieve one of my career goals and a little scared of the load of responsibility that comes with the title.
What is the biggest personal challenge of your job as VP-IT?
Ensuring that I have my priorities balanced. I am a mom and a person first, VP second. There are times the work is going to be a top priority, times when mom duties are a top priority, and times when Paula the person is the priority. It’s a constant juggling act.

What is it like being the tech VP for a company that is headquartered in a rural part of Colorado?
I am very fortunate that my predecessor implemented modern and in some cases cutting-edge technologies. My challenge geographically is finding the talent and skillset to support and expand the technology. We run an SAP-centric environment, and we have a small local talent pool—it’s sometimes difficult to get experienced talent to relocate to Greeley, Colorado.

Where does “innovation” fall in your role? Are you a catalyst?
I am most definitely a catalyst for innovation in our organization. IT’s role and value to an organization is changing; we can no longer wait for the business to tell us its needs. IT needs a seat at the table to understand business goals and challenges so that we can propose solutions. We need to be proactive and ensure that we are able to solve real problems with the latest technology, not just chase the new bright shiny object.

Jerry Seinfeld had Newman. Sherlock Holmes had Professor Moriarity. Who is your nemesis?
Cold-calling sales people.

Apart from addressing the top and bottom lines, what are the major job challenges you face as VP-IT?
I don’t believe that I am unique in dealing with a disparate population of end users. I’ve got end users in the organization that have been with the company for 30-plus years that hold a tremendous amount of IP. We need to figure out how to get that out of their heads, which is sometimes a difficult task as most of them are from the era of “knowledge is power, and I’m not sharing my power”—contrast this to the new workers entering the workforce that want to share everything. My other major challenge is change management. We have a significant portion of the organization that is change-averse, and ensuring that we can answer “What’s in it for me?” is sometimes a challenge. We’ve also got some folks that are just not tech savvy and struggle. I’ve still got to provide viable solutions that will allow them to get their work done.

What is the one thing you need to delegate that you haven’t yet?
IT governance—how we prioritize and run day to day. In a small company, sometimes good process and procedure are viewed as red tape; there is an art to finding the right balance.

How do you personally keep up with technology in general?
Industry trade publications, conferences, social media, my team, and my kids. Yes, that’s right, my kids.

How do you personally keep up with the technical details of Animal Health International’s product line? Or do you?
In all honesty, we have too many products for me to have in-depth knowledge about everything we carry.

What part of your job as VP-IT gives you the most satisfaction?
I can’t narrow this down to a single thing—I have two! Providing solutions that solve business problems and bringing value to the business. I love getting the email from one of our internal customers telling me that my team has saved them hours or days, or has generated new business for

Paula Rice: Interesting Tidbits

Best book you read recently: Devil in the White City

Favorite industry publication: ITPro, CIO; I tend to get lots of good snippets of information via social media links, too.

Last time you actually coded or configured: Gosh—probably 10 years ago!

If you weren’t a tech company VP, would you still be in the tech business? Yes, I enjoy the personality types of most tech people and find the ever-changing landscape engaging.

What mobile phone do you carry? iPhone 5.

What other personal technology do you use? I have an iPad and a Kindle.

College education? Bachelor’s degree in business administration, computer information systems, from Colorado State University.
them. Developing my team into even better managers or IT professionals is personally very satisfying to me. I’ve got a great group of folks, and my lasting legacy will not be a project, but my team. Whether they decide to stay at Animal Health International for the duration of their careers or go elsewhere, I want them to have the skills to be considered top management or IT professionals.

What are the most valuable lessons you’ve learned in your career?
If something or someone appears too good to be true, they probably are. Early in my career, I was eager to jump to “something better.” Now I take the time to follow up with research and references.

What is your advice to aspiring IT professionals who wish to move up the ladder to the C-Suite?
The importance of networking. I wish I would have understood the power of relationships earlier in my career. My early days were focused on developing my technical and coding skills; I wish I would have spent more time on learning how to be a better networker. Also, I’m convinced there are three critical skills every successful person needs to have:

- People—can you relate to and effectively manage people?
- Organization—time management, project management, and prioritization.
- Communication—can you clearly articulate ideas using whatever medium necessary?

Tell me about a “typical” day in your life. Is there a lot of structure to your day?
Some days yes, some days no! I really do live by my calendar, but when there is an emergency or outage, my focus changes. My schedule is more manageable than most—I don’t see a need to keep up this pace?

How many emails do you receive per hour?
15–20 on average.

What is lunch like, and do you take breaks?
Lunch is typically something that I’ve brought from home and eat at my desk. Breaks—what are those?

How much work do you do at home during your evenings?
I try to keep this to a minimum, maybe an hour or two maximum.

Weekends?
Unless we’ve got a big project deliverable or an outage, I’m typically in monitoring mode on the weekends.

Do you take vacations, and if you do, are you plugged in?
Yes, I do make time for vacations—they are never long enough. I’m always plugged in; I do review email throughout the day and try to keep responses only to emergency situations. I’m an early riser, so I typically spend an hour or two in the wee hours of the morning keeping up while everyone else is still asleep.

How long do you think you can keep up this pace?
My schedule is more manageable than most—I don’t see a need to change the current pace.

How often do you see the CEO/COO/CFO?
Our CEO and CFO are located in the same building. I see them regularly at least two to three times per week.

What is the best part of your day?
Mornings—it’s the time of day that I’m able to think most clearly and I have the most energy. I’m one of those people who gets up at 4:30 a.m. to squeeze in a run before heading into the office. If I don’t get in my daily run, I’m off for the whole day. My runs are my time to do my most focused thinking. Maybe I should figure out how to get a treadmill in my office.

What do you think might be your next job?
I miss having direct customer interaction and enjoyed my previous positions dealing with customer experience. I’ve got the hands-on experience that I can relate and empathize with the issues and challenges of the CIO. Maybe a chief customer officer position in an IT product-focused company.

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