



***Joan Herbig, Chief Executive Officer
XcelleNet
2001 Woman of the Year in Technology***

Thriving on Risk and Change

Growing up in Louisville, KY the fourth of five children in a self-described “very typical” large family environment, Joan Herbig had no more exposure to risk and change than the average child. However, somewhere in her genetic make-up, a surprise was waiting to be discovered. So how did this young liberal-arts-loving girl become a highly respected technology entrepreneur and visionary in the software and wireless space? Good question. *Great story.*

If you’ve read Dr. Sylvia Rimm’s book “See Jane Win,” you’ll appreciate the fact that Joan’s upbringing has several common themes of other successful women. For instance, she went to a single gender / all girls’ school, made good grades, and had supportive parents.

As a young student, Joan especially liked French, and went on to study in France after completing high school in 1975. The following year she returned to Louisville to attend U of L where she earned a BS degree in French.

Joan’s intelligence and strong academic background – coupled with her affinity for her major - allowed her to breeze through college. But the next step wasn’t quite as easy. “I wasn’t very practical-minded when it came to a career,” she said. “My French major really hadn’t prepared me to do anything.”

Early work experience

Not that her own career path was Joan’s only consideration at this point. Married at twenty-one to her “complete opposite,” a math-lover and mechanical engineer, Joan was now a part of a couple. Her husband’s job with IBM soon took them to Raleigh, NC. Raleigh became their home for several years.

As for her early work experience while in Raleigh, that was rather interesting. She actually got a job as a clerk in a large insurance company. There she observed that everything seemed to be as predictable as a bell ringing to start and end the day. Risk,

change, challenge?? Not hardly. But what did catch her attention was a guy who was building his own computer. Joan was intrigued.

So intrigued in fact that she started night school to learn more about computers. Her husband provided great support and assistance. Within a year, Joan moved back to Kentucky following her husband's job. Realizing there were few opportunities in French, she went to work for IBM in customer support. She decided to return to school at the University of KY where she enrolled in a masters program in Computer Science. "I immersed myself in learning all I could about the computer business," she said. Apparently, she had found her niche. Receiving her degree from UK, she used it as a springboard for a new career in technology.

Change in direction - more risk, more reward, more family

Joan's first daughter was born soon after she finished her Masters, followed by another daughter three years later. By this time, the family had moved to the Atlanta area. During her daughters' early years, she worked in a variety of technology-focused positions, primarily on a part-time basis. By the mid-nineties, she was working full time at Digital Communications Associates (DCA). Her position at DCA was Senior Product Line Manager responsible for marketing and product management of the company's Windows, Windows NT DOS, and OS/2-based mainframe and midrange host access software product lines.

Concurrent with the change in career direction, Joan became increasingly aware that she thrived on change and had no fear of risk either. In 1995, an opportunity presented itself for Joan to join XcelleNet. She quickly rose to the position of Vice President of Marketing. Later in 1998, the company was acquired by Sterling Commerce and she became President of Sterling Commerce's Managed Systems Division.

What happened after that would dramatically alter Joan's career and her life in general. It would also test her in ways she never anticipated. In early 2000, the Managed Systems Division was spun off from Sterling Commerce and the remaining operations again were named XcelleNet. Although the company had outstanding technology and a loyal customer base, it faced many serious operational issues. Joan, a group of financial backers, and a hand-full of dedicated employees set about to save and ultimately breathe new life into the company.

By late 2000, many of their goal had been achieved and in 2001, Joan's turn-around achievements were recognized by the Atlanta business community, earning her the prestigious Woman of the Year Award in Technology. Not bad for a French major with limited drive in her early career!! And, given Joan's relative youth, it's clear that other business accomplishments are sure to come in the years ahead.

A perspective on family and personal life

What's equally if not more impressive about Joan's story is what she says about her family and her personal life. No doubt that her husband is the person who has had the most influence on her. For years she followed him and his career. But due to an illness

including a near-death experience ten years ago, her “life partner” has chosen to devote more time to the family and for the past two years, has been a wonderful stay-at-home dad.

“It works because we’re truly partners. Partners share each other’s success. My husband isn’t threatened by me or what I do at work. He’s always accepted his part of the responsibility for the children, now 12 and 16. My daughters seem fine with it, too, although my youngest recently told me that it was embarrassing that her dad was the one who was with all the other moms at her games. I make as many of the games as I can and I really don’t think there’s a problem. The bottom-line is the relationship we have with our children and it’s strong.”

Joan admitted that her husband’s illness had caused her to reevaluate her priorities and her family responsibility. She seems to agree with other successful women leaders today that “having some of it” may well be the objective where work/life balance is concerned.

A perspective on leadership and company culture

As a leader, Joan is forthright and effusive. She can’t say enough about her management team at XcelleNet. “They’re awesome,” she exclaims. “Taking over as president and CEO, I wasn’t sure I’d like working in this environment. But I love it. And I think we have a tremendous opportunity to be the leader in our space as mobility and wireless become mainstream.”

In an interesting twist of reality, Joan’s former boss at DCA – someone she clearly respects for his business experience and acumen – is now on her board at XcelleNet!

Self-effacing about not knowing it all as a leader, Joan said this was particularly true about functional areas. “I’ve made plenty of mistakes,” she stated, “but I just try not to duplicate them. I usually trust my gut, my instinct, which is typically pretty good. And the truth is, the worst mistakes I’ve made were when I didn’t listen to my gut.”

Describing the culture of her organization, Joan is obviously proud of the openness of communications. “I believe in being pretty direct, not sugar coating things. Productive confrontation is a healthy part of any successful organization. Here we’re all very results-oriented and the pressure or drive to get the best results doesn’t come from your boss, but rather from your peers. Above all, we put ethics front and center in how we do business and treat each other.”

In the past, Joan said she always thought of herself as someone who wanted to be liked. Managing through the recent economic downturn has made her aware of the fact that what she really wants is to be respected by her employees. “I know every person’s name and I care about each one. But in order to keep the company in business, I have to make the tough decisions and I’ve had to develop thicker skin.”

One of Joan’s role models is Carly Fiorina of Hewlett-Packard. “I admire her because she didn’t cave in. She stood by her convictions. I think there are ‘hills to die for’ and

you need to stick to your guns on those issues. I also think it's important to say YES as much as you can."

What does the future hold for this visionary technical leader, wife and mother? Well, according to Joan herself, "My goals are to make the company really successful in the short term. And then I'd like to write a book...but I'm not exactly sure what the subject will be. Truth is, I don't have a master plan for my life, never have."

No master plan? Maybe not. But with her confidence, capability, and courage – as well as her love of change, it's a pretty sure bet that whatever Joan decides to do, success will follow. And like so many other women leaders today, she'll likely redefine success to fit her own definition.

November, 2002

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Book Research / Age of SHEros