

Kathy Baldanza

She loves gadgets. She's stayed up all night coding in Assembler. She finds start-ups exhilarating (and exhausting). And she still likes the maths that got her into computing in the first place



Kathy Baldanza is the Vice President of Engineering at Perforce but over the 26 years she's worked in IT there's hardly anything she hasn't tried. She came into the business sideways – "I sort of backed into it" – starting out as a data analyst working with FORTRAN. "It was kind of boring, to tell you the truth, but the people were great and I learned about coding and application development and I fell in love from that point on. I found a career which I thought could be very fulfilling; I could be self-supporting. I really felt like I had a lot of options back then."

From analysis she moved into application development, then hardware, training and QA before moving to Perforce, picking up a degree along the way by studying part time for eight years. The range of jobs was partly a deliberate career plan – she wanted to experience different areas of software engineering. Often it was down to the power of networking, especially contacts she made at Ingres. "I made a lifetime of connections and friends and business associates which in this industry still makes a difference. Most of my jobs that I've gotten along the way are because I've known somebody – or known somebody who's known somebody. It's a very small community in a lot of ways."

The Ingres community outlived the company. "We still have an email list even though I think that company officially died sometime in the mid-90s. We call it the culture without the corporation. We just had our ten year anniversary and there were hundreds of people there – we had a band, we had caterers! People know each other and a lot of people have changed their career since then but the connections are still there. I don't know how

many other businesses have that type of network going on. I don't think that people realize either how their impact at a job can impact where they are 20 years later. It can follow you; for the good and the bad."

Another big influence for her was working for start-ups like Illustra and Cohera. "I really like the start-up world. I really enjoyed the boom time and I learned more in those years than I did in the whole ten, fifteen years prior to that – because you're moving as fast as you can, you're working incredibly hard hours. I thoroughly enjoyed getting down into the code level and playing hard. My career boomed because I learned so much in such a short space of time and not just the technical side, but how business works and how businesses are grown."

That's a skill she thinks more developers could use, although she knows what it's like to get attached to what you've been working on. "I've had to stop a project and take the developer for ice cream because he looked like he was going to cry. You put your heart and soul into something, and if the product or project gets cancelled, no matter what part you have in it, it's like your baby – you get so invested in it. So business doesn't always make sense. I've seen cases where companies will stop a project and not explain to people why."

Her advice to younger developers is to learn everything they can, to keep an eye on new technologies that appeal to them and not to be afraid to move on. "Keep learning. I think it's a mistake once people think they know everything. I would find mentors, I'd find technical mentors, other developers that would help. I would learn humility; Partake in code reviews. I think it's real important that they

follow their passion. The mistake sometimes is to just get hooked into one technology. We saw that a lot with COBOL programmers in the 80s. It's not the kind of field you can sit back in and watch technology go by or you're going to get old really fast. I think it's important to follow the trends and keep learning and taking classes."

She wouldn't claim she can predict how the industry will turn though. "Back in the mid-90s when Java started becoming very popular I had thought VRML would be the new 3D of the Web. I was having a blast! I was out taking classes to learn Java so I could play with VRML - but it never materialised."

As a manager, she wants people who are passionate about their job. "I really believe that people should do the job that they want to do. I used to tell people always keep a current resume; I've sent people on job interviews within a company and outside of a company because I think it's important that people are doing the job they want to do and not just because they're there."

If that means giving people a nudge in the right direction, well that's part of her job. At the height of the dotcom boom she persuaded Informix to take a capable team of QA engineers and move them into development rather than lose them to startups. "It was the boom, there were options and opportunities; they were really talented. I cut a deal with one of the directors of development and said this is an amazing of team of folks; they really want to work hard. You could take them with their knowledge that they have now. They all have CS degrees, they're all brilliant; make them write code, make them write product."

The benefits of moving into a new field sometimes turned out to be much greater than she expected. "I had never trained in my life - I'd never stood up in front of a crowd. Becoming a trainer probably was one of the best things for my career because I was very shy and very quiet and I had to learn to stand up in front of groups of people, put my thoughts together and present."

The manager who hired her as a trainer at Ingres, Françoise Tourniaire, is still a mentor and friend. "She's one of these people with extreme focus, very no-nonsense - her desk is always clutter free. She just had an attitude of 'just do it' and I very much respected that. She's very single-minded in her approach and very pragmatic."

She credits another colleague from her start-up days, Donna Carnes, with developing her business skills. "We really were in a very intense work environment, with crazy hours and Donna was very respectful. She really dealt with how to remove the personal from business. She taught me how to establish business relationships, how to understand where people are coming from, how to communicate clearly and how to negotiate. How to communicate, but fighting for what's right and keeping your integrity. She made a big impact on me."

Lessons from male colleagues were just as useful. "I learned how to spend money from men. I was very budget conscious, they taught

me how to spend when necessary; that's the big company thing I learnt. There's a time to close the cheque book - but there's a time to open it too." She's always looked for people to learn from at every job. "One of the things I would always do was pick a mentor - and I might not tell that individual they were my mentor! I would look for people that I could either learn something new from, or I respected their style - or I didn't understand their style because that you can learn a lot from too."

Even as a VP she's still learning from the people she works with at Perforce. "Now that I've gotten up this food chain, instead of having mentors it's more the individuals you work with at the same level. It becomes kind of peer mentoring. You work out your issues and discuss business relationships."

That kind of interaction marks the companies where she's been the happiest, although it's sometimes taken more unusual forms. At one startup where she was running QA she played racquetball with the developers. "It was great! We'd get our frustrations out. 'Yes it's a bug!' 'No it's not a bug!' Wham! It's a way to really understand, to get to know the people you work with. You're critiquing what they're doing. They're critiquing what you're doing. There has to be a healthy amount of respect and communication."

It helps that she's known the COO and the VP of marketing at Perforce for 15 years - the Ingres connection again. And she's seen first hand the frustration and inefficiency that dog too many projects. "I've been in many companies where engineering and marketing fight with one another over features and over dates. I was at one startup and I won't name names but we actually had a product built and we didn't have customers. I've been in organizations where the football gets thrown around; 'we're done developing. Here QA, take it from here. Oh there's a support group, what do they need to know? Docs? Oh forget about them!'"

"What happens is individual managers start building their little fiefdoms and they set up their processes and they're not communicating with the other group. Each group has its own way of doing things and they don't understand the needs of each other and they don't understand the timing of each other. I think a lot of big companies - because of the way it's chopped up - those groups don't get to either respect each others work or communicate what's needed between them. I think also having dodged from group to group I feel a little of the pain and a little of the needs of each of those groups."

One need she understands is giving developers time to code. The start-up pressure cooker doesn't just speed up the learning curve. It also lets developers indulge working habits that the rest of the industry doesn't always understand, but as a developer herself, Kathy Baldanza knows that sometimes you just need to leave the coders to get on with it.

"Every time you interrupt a developer you lose 15 minutes of development time. I remember at college one time I locked myself in

the lab; I wasn't supposed to be there overnight but I was. There was the first time I got a computer; it was an 8Mhz 8088 - 16MHz with the turbo button on - and I remember doing assembler all night long and staring at that screen and thinking this is coolest thing. And you could spend days and hours at it; you end up in your own world. You need to go to that level to program - I think at big companies a lot of times developers aren't given the chance to get into that; they're called into too many meetings, they're drawn into too many of those little things in the day to really get their work done."

Of course the disadvantage of spending all night coding is what it can do to your personal life. "The biggest thing I'd say is people really forget that they have a life! They have to balance their life and give back to the community. That's something that took me a good ten years to learn. All I thought about was work and all I did was work - and that's changed a lot for me. As much as I enjoyed start-ups - and I learned a lot - we did lose a lot of souls along the way; a lot of people became disillusioned."

Kathy Baldanza isn't disillusioned; she's on the board of one startup and she still finds it exciting. She's committed to Perforce for the long haul too, not least because she controls the destiny of the engineering group. "The buck stops here. I think I'd be in culture shock if I went to another company as the VP of engineering and I was swung around by the marketing team. I'm not constantly being forced to do the minimal thing or something we can't really fit in but we're going to do a half job on. It's nice to be somewhere where there's a valid product and the product makes sense and the product does something useful." ■■