

An oral history interview with Janet Perna, member of the WITI Hall of Fame, conducted on July 29th, 2003, by IBM Corporate Archivist Paul Lasewicz.

LASEWICZ: Thank you for agreeing to sit down with us. Can you please describe your current position and title? What do you do?

PERNA: I'm the general manager of IBM's Information Management business, which is part of the IBM Software Group. Information Management deals with the management of all forms of information, whether it be transaction data, images, digital media, computer generated reports, or Web information.

IBM's relational database model is considered to be one of the greatest technical innovations within the IT industry. In fact, anyone who buys a hamburger at McDonald's or completes a credit card transaction or withdraws money from a bank, has probably touched an IBM database which is behind the scenes.

And so my responsibility as the general manager includes the product and business strategy, investment priorities, research and development, and sales and marketing of our database business. This is a really fast-growing business. What started out as a simple way to store and access rows and columns of data has evolved into a \$8.8 billion industry. About 70 percent of all corporate data in the

world is managed by DB2 residing on IBM servers, used by more than 450,000 companies worldwide.

LASEWICZ: Can you talk a little bit about your educational background and your early job experiences, and how did these help prepare you for the career that you've had?

PERNA: Well, I can't say that my educational background or my early job experiences had any direct correlation to what I'm doing today.

My educational background is in math. When I got out of university, computer science programs were not widely available. And so, some of the early jobs that I had were very tedious, like working in a book bindery -- and not to compare my current role to working in a book bindery; however, it really taught me to persevere. Early activities and participation on athletic teams also taught me about teamwork and the power of the team. So, I look at every experience that I've had as offering something to learn from, and I've taken those experiences forward into my work today.

Before coming to IBM, I taught high school math. And that was a really great place to learn about managing people, project management, coaching, motivation and communication skills. Teaching has probably been the best base of

experience for providing the kind of leadership and direction that I provide today.

LASEWICZ: [That's right], Fran Allen also started off as a math teacher...

PERNA: There weren't many other things for women to do in those days. [LAUGHTER]

LASEWICZ: Can you talk about what attracted you to IBM and what was your first job with the company?

PERNA: I grew up in a town that was not far from Poughkeepsie, New York. And in the 1950s and 1960s, Poughkeepsie was the mecca of IBM.

At that time, I didn't know much about what IBM did. I knew that there were IBM typewriters, punch cards and very large computers. However, I also knew that IBM was a highly-respected company in the community. Its customers had great respect for IBM, and IBM valued the people who worked there.

IBM also made a strong investment in building and educating the people who worked there. While the software industry had not yet arrived, I wanted to learn more about this new field of programming.

I also knew that IBM was interested in teaching people and I was interested in learning. So it was a really great match.

LASEWICZ: Did you have any career goals at the time you joined IBM, or did they come later?

PERNA: Career wise, I didn't have any grand plan or great aspirations. My career goals have always been to have a good time doing what I'm doing, to enjoy coming to work every day, and to contribute to the overall business or team.

And that's really been the way I've directed my career. Fortunately, I've done quite well just using that approach. And today, in the position that I'm in as the general manager of Information Management, it couldn't be a better spot for me. I really enjoy who I work with, I enjoy what I'm doing and the contribution that we're making to our business.

LASEWICZ: After you joined IBM, was there a specific moment or a turning point when you knew that this was where you wanted to make your career?

PERNA: When I first joined IBM, I was working second shift computer operations in San Jose. And for anyone who

has ever done that, you probably can relate to what I'm talking about. That was one moment in time when I was not happy because I was not enjoying the work. In fact, I thought I would probably leave after a year and go back to teaching math.

In hindsight, working the second shift was probably the best learning experience that I've ever had because it really gave me a perspective for what our customers deal with in terms of using our products on a day-to-day basis. And it's enabled me to build a special bond and empathy with our customers today.

But the major breakthrough that influenced my decision to stay with IBM occurred about a year into my work in shift operations when I was sent to a two-week class about MVS. At the time, the MVS operating system was in the early stages of shipping and we were going to be migrating our production systems in San Jose to MVS. When I returned from the class, I was asked to be part of the MVS migration team. I worked with some incredibly bright people. I really enjoyed what I was doing and I never looked back.

LASEWICZ: How about mentoring? Can you talk a little bit about the role that mentoring has had for you during your career?

PERNA: Mentoring is really about sharing experiences and sharing knowledge with other people. Over the 29 years that I've been with IBM, I have had the good fortune of working with a tremendous number of talented people in the company.

One thing about IBMers is they are very talented people who are very willing to share their experience and knowledge.

And so mentoring has come to me in many, many ways. It's come to me through working with my colleagues; it's come to me in working with customers; it's come to me in working through the people I work for; and also with the people who work for me.

And so, mentoring is about continuously building your knowledge base and learning from the people who have been there before, regardless of where they are in the organization and in the world.

LASEWICZ: In the past few years, more and more women have entered the workforce and are filling senior-level management positions particularly during the timeframe of your career here in IBM. There's also been a lot of attention given to gender issues and differences in the workplace. What are your views on this, and how do you see the future role of women in IBM?

PERNA: To begin, there's a shortage of IT skills in the world today. Technology is a talent-based business and it's very important that we are attracting and retaining the best talent -- both men and women -- into technology fields and into IBM.

What we've seen over the last 20 or 29 years, since I began, is many more women in leadership and executive positions within IBM and within our customer and partner base.

As we continue to have more new role models and focus on building the pipeline of talented men and women into executive positions, I'm very confident that we will have many more women in top management positions as we look ahead to the next 20 years.

LASEWICZ: Okay, let's change topic a little bit here. As you reflect upon your career at IBM, what has been your most satisfying experience?

PERNA: Clearly, building a business within IBM has been very satisfying. However, I think the most satisfying experience for me is centered around the people and the relationships I've built; the teams that I've been on within IBM.

It's about working together with IBMers around the world, as well as with customers and partners to create, evolve and innovate technology.

So, the real success here is about the people and being part of something that makes a great company--that's built from great people. I'm very proud to be part of that team.

LASEWICZ: You mentioned you've been here 29 years. I imagine you've faced your share of obstacles and challenges. So why have you stayed?

PERNA: Well, I've stayed for the same reasons that I came to IBM to begin with. It is truly a great company with respect and value for the customers, for the people who work here, and for the communities that we operate in.

And it's also a company that is very innovative. There is no other company that has brought as much innovation to the world in the way that IBM has.

If I look at the things we're involved in today, like grid computing to address breast cancer research or the mapping of the human genome...

Today we're involved in bio-informatics and in information-based medicine, the merger of biological sciences with technology to solve problems like diagnosing disease, curing disease, treating disease -- things that will significantly improving the quality of life for people.

These are the kinds of innovation that IBM is working on today. These are the innovations that are going to fundamentally change the quality of life for people. These are the things that really matter in life -- and why I feel passionate about the work we're doing at IBM.

LASEWICZ: Okay, we've got a question about work/life balance. How have you addressed that issue during the course of your career?

PERNA: [LAUGHTER] You know, there are those who think about work and they think about life as two separate things. And there is only life.

And within life, one of the things I do is work...it's my profession. Of course, one of the things that I constantly struggle with is the balance between how much family, how much work, and how much community. Quite frankly, how much time I need for myself on just personal maintenance and the recreational things I enjoy doing.

And so, there's always this balance that one must strike. For me, I've had to set boundaries about what I will and won't do, what's important to me and then making sure that I get all of those things in balance on an ongoing basis.

But there isn't a silver bullet here. It's a very individual process and everyone has to do that for themselves.

LASEWICZ: No magic formula?

PERNA: There is no magic formula to how to balance the aspects within one's life.

LASEWICZ: What advice would you offer to a high school or a college student today?

PERNA: Learn to read and write and focus on your communication skills.

I see too many people coming out of our educational system today who have difficulty communicating in a cogent way; who have difficulty writing a memo. It's important to focus on basic communication skills.

Also, teaming skills -- teaming and interpersonal relationships are very important because we work in a collaborative environment...and in a world that is increasingly becoming more collaborative across its borders.

That is, working on projects within a company, between companies, with customers, with partners. Increasingly, interpersonal skills and collaborative capabilities are becoming very important.

LASEWICZ: To kind of go a little bit further with that same question, in terms of advice to young girls and women perhaps considering a career in technology, is there anything that looking back over your years in technology that you can give them insights into how they should approach that or why they should approach that?

PERNA: I think that many people view technology as geeks sitting in a room with pizza coming under the door.

In fact, the technology field is nothing like that. It is very collaborative, it requires a lot of communication and a lot of interaction with people. It is a very social discipline versus the stereotype which portrays it as a very isolated environment.

And so, I think as we look at both boys and girls -- because this isn't a gender specific industry, right? To really open their eyes to the possibilities and what it takes to develop a career in technology...it requires a lot of teaming. This is a skill that both boys and, increasingly more girls, learn through playing sports.

LASEWICZ: Well, those are all the formal questions I had. Is there anything that you would like to add that we haven't touched on? Anything that you maybe would have done differently in hindsight, or...? Anything that you didn't think you were going to do?

PERNA: I'm very happy with the way my career has evolved. As I said, there was no plan. It evolved because I made a series of decisions based on what I really enjoy doing. And thinking about it in that context rather than in the context of the next promotion or whatever -- that's what has been the key to my success.

I really felt my way through my career by pursuing what I enjoy; figuring out how I can leverage that to add value to the company, and then just going out and making it happen. So, that's been my internal compass.

LASEWICZ: Were there other things like consistent themes from position to position that you can, looking back on,

say yes, there were continuities here that I was clearly after the same thing, or were there things that made you successful that came into play?

PERNA: Well, I may be an anomaly within IBM because I've worked in the same area -- databases -- for 20 years. And so what I've been doing is building upon the same foundation, and then expanding beyond that core strength.

Building the data management business has been like running a start-up that was very small and is now a multi-billion dollar business for IBM. And that's been fun for me.

In addition to building a business, my career at IBM has also been about building relationships with the people who started this with me; people who I've worked with for many years, including customers.

I've had customer relationships that go back over 20 years -- relationships that started around the things that we talked about 20 years ago and I was able to commit to and deliver over the course of these past two decades.

And so I've been fortunate in that respect. I think the unique thing for me has been the continuity of the business that I've been building. I haven't had a career that has taken me from one part of IBM to another. But rather, I

have expanded upon my core skills by learning and adding new skills beyond where I started in database and engineering.

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