

Judy York

Clearing the Comfort Zone

"No!" Judy York proclaimed.

Naturally, the teenage girl was sick of her father's crazy notions.

"But you're so good with computers! Going into a field like that would be so natural for you, honey," he insisted.

Already taunted by her classmates for her dark Romanian skin tones and painfully aware of the limitations imposed by the shyness that had evolved from early childhood, she refused to entertain the idea of a career that would most certainly, in her seventeen-year-old mind, condemn her to a lifetime of nerdiness. Even though she had always enjoyed writing programs for the Commodore 64 her father had brought home when she was twelve years old, coding the machine to sing songs or play cartoons, a career in technology most certainly wouldn't do.

Now the President and CEO of NETCONN Solutions, Inc., a multi-million dollar company specializing in providing IT services to the Department of Defense (DoD), it would seem that Judy has come around somewhat to her father's advice. However, it was only after getting her English degree and realizing that she would have to make a living on her own that she discovered he may have had a good point.

"Still, my first dream had been teaching," Judy explains now. As a young girl, she would draw up worksheets for her little brother, sitting him down in their playroom and giving him lessons on a little easel. Though she got a sales job as a baby photographer right out of college, she then transitioned into a sales training position, which allowed her to explore her teaching passion. "I then wanted to go back to school for corporate development and training, but my dad told me to get my MBA instead because it would open more doors," she recalls. "He said my passion for teaching could be expressed in other ways.

Thankfully, I listened that time."

Thus, after six years of job experience and moving into a District Manager position, Judy's employer paid for her to attend night classes toward her MBA. She then went to work for Vanguard Cellular Systems, Inc., which was acquired by AT&T Wireless in 1999. Working her way up from sales to training to project management, she also earned a Masters in Information Systems and a Certificate in Project Management to supplement her MBA. Ultimately telecommuting to Redmond, Washington, things were going well until AT&T ordered all off-site employees supporting the corporate headquarters to relocate.

With that, Judy launched an intensive and proactive search, identifying companies she believed she would be able to provide value to. "I knew I had to just go out there and work it, and I found this little company in Hagerstown, Maryland," she explains. "I sent them my resume even though there were only openings listed for technical jobs. I

figured that, with the diverse technical skill sets advertised for, they were bound to need someone like me to help them plan, coordinate, and engage resources." That company just happened to be NETCONN Solutions.

NETCONN is a woman-owned organization founded in 1997 by engineers and program managers who worked for the Army Information Systems Engineering Command (ISEC), which operated out of Fort Ritchie in Maryland. After the installation's closure in 1995, the founders left their civil service positions and went their separate ways. Then, in 1997, the Defense Information Systems Agency (DISA), which had taken over some of the functions previously supported by Army ISEC prior to Ft. Ritchie's closure, wanted to do another round of data center consolidations in anticipation of Y2K. As a result, NETCONN was formed so the



founders could continue to support data center consolidations, migrations, and design work within this infrastructure they had come to know so intimately. DISA later blossomed into NETCONN's primary client, with additional services provided to other DoD agencies.

Today, NETCONN provides a full life cycle of support for DISA, supplying engineers that design solutions for other DoD agencies looking to obtain capabilities from DISA. Then, once these agencies purchase the services, NETCONN supplies full implementation, operations, and maintenance support.

Linda Frakes was the company's first President and CEO and oversaw Judy's education and assimilation when she started with the company as General Manager in 2003. At that time, NETCONN was 80 employees strong and drew revenues of \$10 million. Acknowledging that it was a small and privately held firm, Judy knew the company presented a greater risk than other job offers she had received, but she believed it would afford her greater learning experiences and opportunities in the future. In retrospect, her analysis couldn't have been more accurate.

Judy had no idea that Linda had already announced to her partners her intentions to retire, which speaks volumes to her natural aptitude and enthusiasm for the work, considering she was offered a job she didn't even realize was on the table after only six months of observation. "When they pulled me aside to ask if I was interested in the position, I knew the company had tremendous potential," she says. "We were running very lean with strong margins, and they wanted me to get into strategic planning immediately. What's more, I've always loved the small business atmosphere. Being able to get your hands involved in the various aspects of an organization was a key driver for me." Four months later, Linda departed, and Judy officially filled her shoes.

At that point, Judy had acquired considerable experience leading cross-functional teams for three or four years—a primary reason why NETCONN had seen such potential in her. Touching on engineering, marketing, legal issues, and customer matters, her strong business background also came as a tremendous asset in light of the fact that most of NETCONN's founders boasted engineering-only expertise. Her first act as President and CEO, then, was the implementation of a new accounting system, a critical step towards

positioning NETCONN to pursue additional prime contracts with the Federal government. Beyond these skills, NETCONN had targeted her for her background in sales, marketing, training, managing, and notably for the potential she exhibited as a spokesperson.

At the time Judy assumed her position, NETCONN had been doubling in size each year even though DISA remained their primary customer. Still, it wasn't all smooth sailing for the young CEO. Just as Linda had never run a company before, Judy was learning as she went along—a process that was not easy with the birth of her first child shortly after she assumed the presidency, and later with a serious hospitalization for septic shock. "I had been feeling invincible... like I could and should do everything, especially as a woman proving myself in a male-dominated industry," she explains. "But after a week in the ICU, it hit me that I needed to slow down a little bit."

Part of this realization was implemented in the team building initiatives Judy launched in 2005 and 2006, replacing and reorganizing the predominantly administrative staff with people who were experts in their field. "I wanted individuals who were passionate about and committed to the role they were hired for," Judy says. "I had to get my hands around all the pieces, then get the right people in place, and then hand those pieces out, which allowed me the time to dive into strategic planning."

She also seized a tremendous opportunity for professional growth in 2006 when she joined Vistage, a results-oriented coaching program for CEOs specializing in strengthening leadership and decision-making skills. Prior to joining, Judy had adopted the company's reigning mentality that growth was best achieved through a diversification of services and customer base. NETCONN had thus committed a tremendous amount of time, energy, and resources to winning contracts in Maryland, Federal civilian agencies, and the commercial space. It took only one Vistage meeting, however, to show her that gaining more market share in the areas a company already excels in can oftentimes ensure a much smoother and stronger pattern of growth.

In truth, the contracts they had been so thrilled to win in Maryland were paltry compared to those held with the DoD and entailed significantly more negotiating, as their reputation

and accomplishments were unknown in this new market. “When we finally got to the table, we were just one of thousands of small businesses without a competitive advantage in a new arena,” she reports. “After that Vistage talk, though, it was like everyone on the executive team saw the light simultaneously. We immediately shifted our entire focus back to DISA and other unexplored agencies within the DoD that DISA touches and supports.” As a result, NETCONN maintains its perfect track record of annual growth, currently at 160 employees and drawing \$30 million in revenue.

So how exactly does someone transform from an introverted young girl, too shy to attend Girl Scouts without the company of her mother, into the powerhouse spokeswoman who singlehandedly introduced herself into a company and won over its leadership? “I always tried to push myself out of my comfort zone,” Judy explains. Whether it was the adventurous cave exploring of her Girl Scout days or her choice to major in English because she knew it would draw her out of her shell more, she didn’t sit idly by as a victim resigned to circumstance. “Still, I would urge someone to take care that they don’t push themselves away from what might very well be their natural core competency,” she advises. Had Judy refused to push herself, it is unlikely she would have developed the confidence, advocacy, and public speaking skills necessary to serve as a President and CEO. Likewise, had she then refused to allow herself to gravitate back toward her natural skill set, she would have missed out on her opportunity with NETCONN as well.

In further advising young people entering the workforce, Judy stresses the importance of gaining experience through internships or other methods, as the knowledge that results will assist in discerning what is and isn’t right for each person. “For people who don’t know what they want to do, I feel that experience is the number one factor in helping to sort things out,” she says. “Many people who are further along in their careers will take the time to speak with you and help you figure out your path. So later on, when you’ve progressed down that path, don’t forget to pay it forward and take the time to offer advice as

well.”

The most compelling piece of advice she offers, however, is quite fittingly a lesson she learned from that wise and patient mentor whose guidance shines through Judy’s story at its most pivotal moments—her father. After starting college at Virginia Tech with a scholarship that demanded passing grades, she found herself midway through a notoriously impossible Calculus course with a D average. When she called her father in despair, however, he told her to pull out her syllabus. After a brief calculation, he pointed out that, if she received A’s for the rest of the semester, she would pass the class with a C.

Unconvinced that she could do it but willing to try, Judy did her homework over and over again each night and went into her next test sick to her stomach with anxiety. The result of all her very literal bellyaching, however, was a 97 percent, and once she had cleared that hurdle, achieving A’s for the semester’s remainder proved infinitely easier. “Just dig in and do it and don’t get scared over something just because it’s challenging,” she says, echoing her father’s words. Regardless of what our comfort zones are built to ward off, venturing beyond the boundaries with this courage of conviction promises a stronger character and brighter future with each step.

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