

FEATURE

Tricia Cotter Orchestrates Operations to Move Netezza Forward Every Day

Tricia Cotter goes home from her vice president of operations role at Netezza satisfied that she's moved the business intelligence data appliance provider forward yet another day — or at least she strives to achieve that sense of accomplishment on a daily basis. "As a startup, if you lose a day, it's a day you can't recover," she says.

Cotter joined Netezza in 2001, a year after its founding, when the Framingham-based company was just beginning to build its first Netezza Performance Server 8000 system. She's in charge of program management, customer service, manufacturing and IT. "I've been here for two years," she notes, "and it's been quite a ride so far."

Netezza, Cotter says, has everything she was looking for in a company. It's a typical startup — "our server is the world's first (!) tera-scale data appliance, which means our systems handle large volumes of data for any kind of analysis" — and the people were of such high quality that working there resonated immediately. "You look left and you look right, and these people are so good you look within yourself to stay at the table."

Cotter was also intrigued by the concept — to



VP of Operations Tricia Cotter makes things happen on a daily basis.

manufacture something 10 to 20 times more powerful than, and at half the cost of, systems made by main competitors IBM and NCR's Teradata — and by the prospect of beginning on the ground floor.

"It was at a beautiful stage for me to come in," Cotter says. "I think sometimes companies wait too long to bring in somebody who can help effect change in the product. Since Netezza was in prototype, I was able to select and ramp the suppliers and work with the design engineers from the get-go to make sure the product was not only manufacturable but it met customer support requirements as well."

From the standpoints of manufacturing and customer support, the appli-

ance isn't that complex, Cotter says. "We use a standard-based architecture that doesn't require customers to do a lot of restructuring of their data tools and applications. We've been able to come in and put in some infrastructure that, as we grow, scales well."

The first NPS system was shipped a year ago July to Vibrant, then a second system was shipped to Epsilon. Orange UK and another telco have recently come on board and the company is in the proof-of-

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FEATURE

concept process with potential clients as well. "We're not going to ship something out there that we don't think has a good chance of converting," Cotter says, "so we've sold boxes in a lot of trials, and we just completed our third round of financing for \$20 million."

There were 30 on board when Cotter started at Netezza. Now there are 80. At the beginning, engineering was the primary function, then manufacturing came into play, next came marketing, then the sales and business development functions and now the 24/7 support operation is growing.

On a typical day, Cotter begins by checking in with the contract manufacturer to see if there are any issues blocking current orders. Then she attends a bug triage meeting to go over any problems encountered in development, in proof-of-concept or in quality assurance. "Then it's a matter of, these are the customer requirements that we're trying to drive, how do we get them into the product requirements. I need to figure out the planning that's required, so I'll meet with marketing and development on a regular basis to make sure we're on track."

Additionally, Cotter might call a customer who's contacted customer service and needs her attention. Or she'll put together a training document. "Those kinds of things can happen on a daily basis, but generally it's more working in each organization here making sure that whatever they need to keep moving forward, they get."

The way Cotter approaches handling Netezza's operations is much the same as the way the company approaches its customers. "If I can find something to help make sales or the engineers more productive, I'm very interested in that. If there's something that will reduce my cycle time and my cost in manufacturing — I'm no different from my customer," she says. "The customer is looking for something that's going to address a need in a way that's going to make buying it a no-brainer."

Cotter got her first taste of managing operations when she was at Boston College and unable to

afford her senior year. A friend's boss needed someone to run the chemistry lab at Honeywell, so Cotter took the job and got her tuition paid by the company as well. "I ended up working as an engineer in their board shop, where I was the only salaried female employee. I was given unbelievable opportunities for experience that allowed me to get a broad brush of operations and a lot of training," she says.

From there, Cotter went to Computervision, Sun Microsystems, Stratus Computer and Visual Networks. She attributes her personal success to picking innovative and fun companies, and to mentors and an MBA along the way. "Most of my stints are about five years," she says. "After Stratus, my mentor then thought I needed a startup, to get out there and do all of the functions at that point. I'd done the program management, the customer service, the manufacturing. Now it was time to run the organization."

Cotter moved to Maryland to become VP of operations at startup Visual Networks, but relocated back to the Boston area when her parents became ill. After a two-year hiatus, she found Netezza. "After that, the market went dead. I feel quite fortunate to have landed a job I love," she says.

Looking ahead, Cotter envisions continual ramping. And with the telcos, which are using the NPS system to prevent leakages in billing revenue and to improve CRM activities, comes worldwide opportunity. "My focus in the next year is going to be answering that and figuring out how I can provide service and product in the quickest time frame with the most flexibility and provide the service in whatever country these systems need to go," she says.

And what about her habit of five-year stints? "The people, the potential — this one's a keeper," Cotter replies. "Sometimes operations is a catchall for all the things people don't like to do but I like that. I like being able to say at the end of the day, 'This is a good one.' My tagline here is: Did you make it happen today? And by every night, that's what I've tried to do."