

The

Women

of Hospitality Technology

A profile of the industry's notable and influential female IT executives



Carol Beggs, CHTP



Christina Cornwell



Cindy Estis Green



Diane Estner



Kristin Ingress



Flo Lugli



Sherry Marek



Kirsten Mollé



Allison Morris, CHTP



Monika Nerger

To celebrate Hospitality Financial and Technology Professionals' (HFTP) strategic goal of elevating our members' professional stature, we decided to publish a special feature on some of the most influential women in hospitality technology from around the globe. The list was generated by polling the industry, press and the HITEC 2014 Advisory Council. This list might not be complete, but it is certainly an excellent representation of the industry's best and brightest.

In our interviews with these women, there was an overall consensus that while females were few and far between in their immediate workplace, gender did not act as a prominent deterrent to their professional growth. They came to IT because of their passion and interest in the confluence of hospitality and technology, and concentrated on working with their teams to integrate the practice.

"I honestly didn't really see myself as 'female' in the business, but rather someone who was very qualified to do what I was doing," wrote Christina Cornwell. "I always approached each issue that needed to be handled in a way that was really about asking myself: What is the best business solution? Not what would a women do in this situation to get things done?"

What follows is a cross section of the women — working on-property, as vendors and consultants, with a variety of specialties — who are guiding the path of hospitality technology.



Vanessa Ogle



Valyn Perini



Sophie Pommois



Connie Rheams



Ursula Rhode



Kris Singleton



Naomi Stark



Menka Uttamchandani



Yvette Vincent



Jing Zhu

Carol Beggs, CHTP

Director of Technology
Chatham Bars Inn ★ Chatham, Mass.



At age 17, Carol Beggs took her first hospitality job as a waitress at the Sheraton. “It was so different and so much more fun than the after school office jobs I had had, that I knew I would never go back to a pure corporate employment.”

She went on to study at Colgate University, but unfortunately a recession coincided with her graduation, making jobs scarce for new graduates. So she took a “temporary” technology job with Sonesta International Hotels Corp. This was definitely not in her life plan since she scored her lowest college grade in Computer Science 101. Fortunately she found a “tremendous” mentor at Sonesta: Jules Sieburgh, CHTP. Sieburgh “most memorably taught me to have my facts straight and to ask questions or present challenges in an organized, succinct way.”

In the early days of Beggs’ career, her challenge came in educating all levels of ownership and management on the value of technology in hospitality, constantly competing for budget dollars against more visible and more tradi-

“Installing a property management system is probably the ultimate hospitality technology exercise in leadership and teamwork. I can’t think of any other system that effects every single division/department/employee of a hotel the way the PMS does. It requires bringing together an entire hotel team and motivating them to do something that will disrupt their schedules, require long hours, make their jobs more difficult in the short term and change long ingrained ways of doing things. To do this successfully is truly an art.”

tional hospitality capital items. “I was fortunate to work for Stephanie Sonnabend, who saw the value of IT very early and very clearly, and was always an advocate for our team.”

For the next 20 plus years, Beggs continued at Sonesta, with increasing IT responsibilities for the company, including longest as its vice president of technology. In August 2013 she took the opportunity to move to the independent luxury property Chatham Bars Inn, a winner of the Forbes Four-Star Award, a big change from her years in the small chain environment. Regardless of the property style, Beggs knows the value to building the right team. “It is critical to choose the right vendor partners the first time around, as the capital investments made with these choices — both financial and human — mean that you will likely be in that relationship for multiple years.” She also emphasizes the

importance of industry involvement, especially for smaller organizations. Such involvement provides a bigger voice and broader knowledge of solutions and options beyond what an organization may have come in contact with directly.

Considering the challenges she continues to face, one thing has remained the same: the need for budget dollars. But also at the top of that list is data security and all its elements, and Beggs is now looking to technologies that help to lessen the broad storage of that data. “It makes no sense to me that this data is stored at tens of thousands of endpoints across all business that accepts cards, so that we have to try to harden all these myriad locations with widely varying levels of technology sophistication.”

She would also like to see the world of HDTV become much simpler and less expensive. She explains that the vast majority of hotels simply cannot afford to replace TVs in every room, every few years. The more that the innovation and change is driven to a centralized point, rather than in every guest room, the better.

Describing the role of an IT department, she says, “It is also always a balancing act between doing the things that will keep the systems running, and doing things that will have a more visible impact for either employees or guests.” ★

Written by Lou Cook

Christina Cornwell

Senior Director Technology Asia Pacific
Hilton Worldwide ✦ Singapore



Working at the Mandarin Oriental, Manila in the early '90s was a career-changer for Christina Cornwell. She originally enrolled in hospitality management at the University of the Philippines because her mother felt the hospitality industry would be a good fit for her.

“I fell in love with the diversity of what the industry could offer. Each day brings something new. And it is all about the people: traveling to new places and interacting with different cultures is especially fulfilling for me.”

But at that job at the Mandarin Oriental, Cornwell helmed a special project to upgrade the point-of-sale system, and it was then that she learned that she liked working with computers. “I enjoyed setting up the system with the hotel operations in mind, and how it could support the leadership team to better manage the business,” she remembers.

From that early entry into the technology field, she was challenged by the need to translate the “tech-speak” into something users in the field could understand. At the same time, she also worked to demonstrate how the process or

“There is probably no function or industry that deals with change as often as IT. So you must lead people to understand that change is an opportunity to improve yourself and your function. I believe that it is important to be an early adopter when it comes to technology. Being behind the curve on technological innovations can potentially put the success of your overall organization at risk.”

procedural changes that could be difficult at the implementation phase would be beneficial in the end. “My challenge was to explain it in a way that lowered their anxiety and allowed them to use the systems effectively.”

Cornwell’s calm approach, has helped her adapt as technology has evolved, as well as deal with those inevitable day-to-day hiccups. For example, during one conversion project, her team was days away from going live, when she received an early-morning call that said that the training couldn’t continue. All the servers were offline and had been moved out of the team’s meeting room. While the initial report said the servers were stored in the kitchen, which gave her pause, Cornwell remained calm. In the end, the servers were found in the hallway, unplugged as the meeting room was being prepared for an event.

“This experience, as with many others, taught me that you should expect the unexpected and plan for the worst,” she remembers.

Current challenges she faces include prioritizing IT projects and allocating and managing the costs of IT (from developing and retaining IT team members to ensuring compliance). To address this, she’s found that establishing a governance process to review all aspects of a project and encouraging a focus on business engagement has helped.

She’s particularly interested in anything relating to digital and mobile technology, and what it means when social media makes a hotel guest knowledgeable about the hotel’s amenities and services before arrival. “We always have to look for ways to ‘know’ what they want when they need it, while at the same time protect their privacy,” she says.

A collaborative leader who learned from a number of mentors, including a general manager with whom she worked with in Singapore, Cornwell has a guiding principle she uses as a manager: “I catch people doing their best and let them know about it.” But more than that, she says, she focuses on hiring the right staff to execute a well-designed plan.

“You must consistently lead in a way that keep team leaders and the people who report to them comfortable with change,” she adds. After all, “there is no function or industry that deals with change as often as IT.” ✦

Written by Margaret Littman

Cindy Estis Green

Co-founder and CEO
Kalibri Labs ★ Potomac, Md.

Cindy Estis Green, may not have known it at the time, but enrolling as an undergrad at Cornell University would inadvertently change her career trajectory. You see, Estis Green didn't go to Cornell with the intention to work in the hospitality industry post-graduation, she went to Cornell to study human development. That soon changed. "Having grown up in a children's summer camp 24/7 operation ('a hotel for kids,' she calls it), I realized I knew more about the hotel business than I thought and it sounded fun and exciting. So I transferred into the hotel administration program and haven't looked back."

An expert in distribution issues, Estis Green's Kalibri Labs, launched in 2012, is helping the hotel industry figure out how to evaluate revenue performance net of customer acquisition costs. By developing an important new set of revenue efficiency metrics and a cutting-edge technology platform, Estis Green enables hotels to target the vexing problem of fast rising costs and expose the insights to dramatically improve profit.

"I have a recurring pattern of creating new technology and introducing it when most users don't understand its application. In each case, I gathered a team of smart and motivated managers to participate in developing these tools and harness their enthusiasm to spread the word. My visions, no matter how innovative and compelling, would never come to life without the power of the team to carry it into the marketplace and help the hotels learn to use it."

Her first taste of working in the technology field of hospitality came with what was then Hilton International. She was tossed into the fire right away, she recalls. "First day on the job I was expected to build marketing information systems," she says. Only problem was she had no inkling of what that really was or how to do it. "Other than one programming class in college and learning to use SPSS in grad school, I had no technology experience," she says. But she figured it out, working closely with the head of IT. "We became pioneers together in building out revenue management, sales automation and marketing databases; it was a time when few were venturing into sales and marketing technology," she says. That head of IT, not hard to believe, became Estis Green's co-founder and now partner at Kalibri Labs.

Estis Green found herself in the middle of hotel technology when, well, there wasn't too much hotel technology around — not like there is today. "I re-



call the comptroller of Hilton International telling me that automating sales would only be a waste of time for the sales teams and keep them off the road from meeting customers," she says.

In earlier times, the biggest challenge before her was power — lack of it, to be precise. "The early systems were underpowered for our aspirations and could not handle the data volumes we wanted to process," she says. "We would wait hours or sometimes overnight for large batches to process before we could get answers to marketing questions from our data."

Much has changed since then. Today, big data is a big interest, particularly for Estis Green. "How will that be harnessed by the travel industry?" she asks. "We have been operating for many years with very limited intelligence driving many business decisions and this may allow the industry to make great strides very quickly in customer service, marketing and operational efficiencies."

Even with her peerless acumen, Estis Green still often faced challenges as a woman in a male-dominated industry, but it never really bothered her. What does concern her is the overall lack of women working in hospitality technology, something she tries to address. "I try and mentor other women whenever possible," she says. ★

Written by David Eisen

Diane Estner

Principal

Danni Enterprises ★ Atlanta, Ga.



The hospitality industry is an archetype of a work-your-way up business. There are countless tales of C-level executives who started as busboys or other general factotums. Then there are others who made their mark in other industries before making the jump into hospitality. That describes Diane Estner, who has just recently moved from her position as vice president of global account sales at Systems Design and Development (SDD). At SDD she managed global strategic business relationships with hotel brands, hotel management companies and technology solution integrators.

Telecommunications is where Estner made her initial foray into technology, cutting her teeth at such companies as Motorola and ConQuest Operator Services. “It was a great time, too,” she says, referring to the era when Six Sigma and TQM were established.

She discovered hospitality in the early '90s, finding it to be a dynamic, challenging and diverse industry. “I enjoy the adventures of travel, working with interesting people and creatively solving problems,” she says.

“My priority and early challenge was learning how to establish and assert myself as a credible peer within the technology environment. I wanted to be recognized and valued for my ideas and contributions to making things happen. Now, for me it’s more about trying to do everything possible to keep up with the ever changing technology landscape, and staying tapped in to the ‘who, what, when and where’s.”

And adventures she has had. On one occasion, her first work trip to Bangkok, to be specific, she was flying in a jumbo jet from Hong Kong with about 25 people total on board. “Something wasn’t right,” she says. She came to learn that the prime minister had just been overthrown. On another occasion she lost her luggage twice during the same business trip, traveling to multiple countries. “I’ve learned to expect the unexpected, be prepared for anything and appreciate the adventure of world travel,” she bravely says.

Shifting from one facet of technology to another did have its challenges for Estner. She particularly had to adjust to understanding the back-end processes of how a hotel runs. “While I had all the product knowledge, I needed to deep dive into learning how a hotel operated,” she says. “It was a

great experience as I worked closely with many casino hotel groups, and I spent a fair amount of time learning the life and trials of hotel IT and communications.”

Beyond the technical aspects, she also had to prove her worth to those around her — those who had been working in hospitality for years. “I’m a business person,” she says. “I’ve never been too heavy on the geeky side,” she jokingly says, though maybe half-jokingly: she was once a rock ‘n’ roll singer.

Like many in the technology side of the hospitality business, Estner is charting the movements and tastes of the new generation of technology users, namely the millennial generation, who she believes will drive the way hotels manage their overall technology deployment and systems.

“Our industry technology is at a tipping point,” she says. “It’s very exciting to see and be a part of the change. I see millennials driving our hotel technology standards and creating new accelerated levels of technology innovation and adoption. When you combine this with the significance and growing dependency on social media, BYOD supportability, content delivery, brand loyalty, cost efficiency, and that ever-important unique hotel guest experience, it’s both exciting and encourages vendor collaboration.” ★

Written by David Eisen

Kristin Intress

Managing Director/CEO
Worldhotels ★ Frankfurt, Germany



In a world where technology continues to play an ubiquitous role, pervading over all aspects of daily life, Kristin Intress, has not forgotten what technology is truly there for: as an aid, not an authority.

“One of today’s main challenges is to prevent technology from taking over our logical thinking,” says the former CEO of CRS provider InnLink. “In our fast-moving and technology-driven times, we often get overly dependent on technology and forget that it is designed to help us, and not control us.”

Not unlike many who have made their careers in the hospitality industry, Intress’ indoctrination began at a young age, 15, while supporting the opening of a new hotel. “Each team, from room service, to kitchen and front desk, was working as one to get the hotel ready for the opening,” she says. “What I like most about the industry? Its essence of people caring about other people’s needs and wishes, and doing their utmost to fulfill them.”

Intress’ introduction to technology, however, did not come via the hospitality industry, but rather the medical field. At first, admittedly, she was a tech

came upon an unexpected glitch — at midnight! What to do? “Solving the problem required calling in the entire team, and they all came, in their pajamas and with their kids and partners,” Intress recalls. “Together, we managed to get the system running, and I learned once again that technology is worth nothing without the people behind it.”

People, not hardware or software, are the key to a successful company. That’s something Intress makes plainly clear. In fact, it’s part of her hiring process. While IT can be a highly specific niche needing a high-level of experience and proficiency, Intress doesn’t just hire people who necessarily have the requisite skills. She’s taken a more maverick tack. “I have blended the hiring process, hiring people from the outside with little to no hospitality IT experience to bring in new ideas. It requires dedication and commitment to training, but helps a company overcome organizational blindness and generate new ideas.”

One thing most of Intress’ peers don’t know is that she is a decorated athlete — having played rugby in the Scottish national women’s league. Many of the lessons she learned in sports, she uses in business. “Working as a team on a common objective: this is the approach I’ve cultivated at each of the companies I’ve worked,” she says. ★

" Overcoming other people's negativity and holding on to my vision was one of the biggest challenges I faced, but it also taught me one thing: To take the first step, it is sometimes better not to know how difficult a journey will be and trust your instincts. Of course, ultimately success is only measured by those who cross the finish line."

novice, but she was intrigued by the possibilities technology could provide. “Technology has the power to unlock our potential, helping us to reach our targets in a faster and more efficient way,” she says.

She was a fast learner, ultimately buying InnLink, though discovering right away that she may have bought a flatlining company, where the technology, Intress says, was “duct-taped together.” So instead of fixing it, she decided to develop a whole new advanced CRS platform. Doing so was one of her biggest challenges, but she persevered even when others told her she’d fail. “To take the first step,” she says, “it is sometimes better not to know how difficult a journey will be and trust your instincts.”

Of course, other issues tested her resolve, but also helped to galvanize the company. Consider the time when InnLink was switching CRS systems and

Written by David Eisen

Flo Lugli

Principal

Navesink Advisory Group, LLC ★ Holmdel, N.J.



It was the mid '90s and Flo Lugli was president of the Hotel Electronic Distribution Network Association (HEDNA). Erik Blachford, then a young exec from Microsoft, approached Lugli, asking to discuss a new initiative with the HEDNA board, hoping to get input. At the next board meeting he described how Microsoft planned to sell hotel rooms on the Internet, how the concept would work with content, rates and inventory.

Without exception, Lugli remembers, every member of the board indicated that this was unlikely to work. “Fortunately for Expedia,” she quips, “Microsoft didn’t listen to us.” Not only is that a funny tale Lugli likes to tell, she says it was a big lesson that bears repeating. “When I come across people who don’t believe that certain change might happen, or can’t imagine how their current business model might be impacted by new technology or emerging business models, I tell this story.”

Lugli retired as Wyndham Hotel Group executive vice president of marketing last year, having worked over the course of a storied career at Travelport,

“ Today, the biggest challenges are simply keeping up with the pace of change, and the plethora of distribution and e-commerce channels that are out there. There are many new entrants and third party solutions that have entered the field to help hotels manage this complex environment. But creating a sound distribution strategy with specific priorities is critical to success today.”

Cendant, Galileo and Wizcom. She started her career almost 30 years ago at People Express Airlines, which was acquired by Continental in 1987. From there she moved on to Howard Johnson, the launching pad to her hospitality career.

“It was early days for the hotel industry within the GDS, and since there wasn’t anyone else to do it, I became responsible for managing our relationships and working with our IT team to ensure we had our content and rates available for distribution. As the GDS continued to improve their hotel systems, I was fortunate to be able to participate in initiatives like the Sabre Hotel Advisory Committee and the Apollo RoomMaster product, as well as other forums to discuss ways to improve distribution,” she says.

While Lugli believes the hotel industry still lags behind the airline and car rental industries in technology to some extent, she sees her peers being challenged to keep up with the pace of change. “While we used to complain about having to manage content and rates/inventory across five GDS, we never imagined what is required today to keep the product on the shelves.”

To have a team that can adapt to those changing demands, Lugli believes IT managers should hire carefully, looking for folks from a cross-section of disciplines who are able to accept risk and failure. But just as important, she says, is to continue to invest in employees after hiring them. “Constant personal and professional development with ongoing training and education is critical.”

What’s critical to Lugli, now that she has re-wired her career with her own consulting firm, is a better effort to enjoy the fun things in life, such as golf, travel, spending more time with friends and family, and drinking good wine, since she admits she never really mastered that elusive work/life balance in the past. “I took ballroom dancing lessons for a few years with my husband, but I’d have to say we could likely be classified as remedial students. But we had a great time.” ★

Written by Margaret Littman

Sherry Marek

Vice President/Owner
Datavision Technologies ★ Pembroke Pines, Fla.



Sherry Marek graduated from the University of Iowa. In 1985, she came to Washington, D.C. for grad school and took a job in the hotel industry where the flexible hours allowed her to combine work and studies. Initially she was hired as a front office clerk at Hilton International. After a year, the property asked her to work the night audit process, which required manually running computer procedures and talking to vendors about their computer applications, or working with IT in the corporate office. She accepted the job.

It was a lucky move. "We were the test site for some new programs from Hilton International corporate, and this was great exposure, learning from the corporate team as we customized programs for our PMS. I was encouraged to help the company understand their guest segments and booking channels, and to create custom reports for my fellow managers and my general manager."

Working so closely with the developing programs only increased her interest in understanding the system's background. She built her technical know-how, as she had great support from corporate and a sister property, where

" At InterContinental Hotels, I led the technical development of an inhouse CRM in the late '90s. We created business rules to extract key data, build a corporate database and import the data from each property around the world. The challenge was to convince our properties to use standard codes and getting the properties to understand the value of this consolidated data to the company as a whole. It took time, but was very useful and provided great insight on our customers."

James Araki, IT manager, became her 'goto' person for her queries. The EAM at the property, Cindy Estis Green, encouraged her to build analytical views of the data, using an early version of Harvard Graphics to produce 2D and 3D graphical presentations of financial and marketing data.

Marek grew as a manager at Hilton under the mentorship of Wibecke Vinke, and in 1991 she moved to InterContinental Hotels as director of front of house systems. In both companies she used outside vendors for primary systems and custom development to enhance them. Working with different vendors enabled her to create a mental check lists of desirable and not so desirable vendor qualities, "That would serve me well down the road as a vendor."

She learned that flexibility is a good thing when it comes to systems. "It is never a good idea to force customers to change their operations to fit the ven-

dors' needs." Also a no-no is not listening to how a hotel company wants to run their business, and instead dictating that the company needs a certain piece of functionality. On the positive side, "I saw the success of 'customer-centric' vendors: always thinking like a customer, understanding their operational needs and how they vary from one to another."

In 1996, Marek and a partner, Sudharshan Chary, started Datavision Technologies. "Our vision was to create a business intelligence system for the hotel industry — a system that could bring together data from other systems (PMS, POS, payroll, spa/golf, etc.), and present it in such a way that users could easily build reports and queries based on their business needs. In other words, self-service business intelligence."

To keep team members knowledgeable on the business issues their customers face, one of Marek's best practices is to encourage her staff to attend industry-focused continuing education, either via webinars or conferences.

And now with close to 20 years as a vendor, Marek has her own Top 10 David Letterman-style list of reasons why becoming a vendor was the right career choice for her. Number one on that list is: "Customers write checks. Vendors cash' em. Nuf said." ★

Written by Lou Cook

Kirsten Mollé

Director

ProTempIT Ltd. ★ Walgrave, Northamptonshire U.K.



Had Kirsten Mollé only been a tad taller, she may today not be prescribing IT solutions for the hospitality industry, but flying the friendly skies. No, travel was her first love, but sadly at the time, her short stature held her back. “At 5’ 3”, I did not qualify for the minimum height requirements for airline hostesses,” she says. A loss for the airlines; a gain for hotels.

Mollé is now the managing director for ProTempIT, which specializes in applying technology into the hospitality business, from strategy and defining standards, to system evaluation and project management. It’s a position she attained via a journey not unlike many other success stories in the hospitality industry.

The German-born Mollé sidestepped university, instead accepting an apprenticeship at the InterContinental Hotel Hamburg, a position that immersed her in all facets of the hotel industry. “After I passed my exams, they offered me a position in front office that set me on my path in the industry,” she says.

And what a path it has been. Her induction into technology was not so unlike the rather bizarre circumstances that prevented her from becoming an airline

“IT is often taken for granted and considered a techie/maintenance type domain, so I had to develop strategies to get my colleagues and managers to understand what considerable role IT can and should play in the business: as part of the product(s) we sell, in generating revenue, or in supporting business decisions with comprehensive and focused data analysis.”

hostess. “I stood in the wrong door at the right time,” she says. Specifically, while working as duty manager at the then InterContinental Portman Hotel London, she was seconded to a sister hotel for a PMS replacement project. “When I got back to my hotel, I found that our IT manager had resigned and I had been promoted in absentia due to the PMS knowledge I had gained,” she says.

Her career in technology began there and as IT manager at the Forum Hotel London, after which she joined IHG’s corporate office to set up the telecoms department, defining and implementing a coherent telecommunication strategy for their hotels in EMEA. Project work in this area offered the opportunity to travel, and often offering an element of the unexpected — from disappearing telephone lines in Kinshasa to being stopped at gunpoint at Beirut airport. Mollé continued her career with IHG as director of applied technology, EMEA, managing the IT project teams and working with the region’s hotels to ensure

business process alignment with the newly implemented technologies.

In 2005, Mollé left IHG for ProTempIT, where her percipient vision drives her consultancy work for a range of international hotel clients. Asked about the key issues facing the industry she says: “The next couple of years will be less about the next big technology, and more about creating the enablers in our industry to maximize the value we can derive from the systems available.”

Her push up the corporate ranks, however, did not come without difficulty — due in large part, she says, because of gender. “Top of the list is probably the challenge of being taken seriously and making myself heard amongst the high-flying male executives on the management teams I have been part of over the years,” she says. “From conversations I’ve had with other woman making their way up in the industry, the challenges are the same — we all just get better at managing them,” she says.

Mollé still has a passion for the industry and the role technology can play in the business. And while she never did become an airline hostess, she was able to find a career doing what she loves: travel. “The travel bug that got me started in the hotel industry is still with me,” she says. “And it continues to take me to amazing places.” ★

Written by David Eisen

HITEC 2014 Special Report

Allison Morris, CHTP

Corporate Director of IT
American Casino & Entertainment Properties, LLC ✪ Las Vegas



Allison Morris' goal after high school graduation was to earn a business degree. Searching for the academic version of horse racing's trifecta, she decided "Studying business with a focus on hospitality and people seemed like an interesting approach." Thus her analysis led towards Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration. Her required freshman courses included an introduction to basic computers. She did well and enjoyed the class which led to more elective computer classes and increasing responsibility as a teaching assistant. "It was a great way to use my hospitality and human resources skills (her other major) as well." She was hooked.

Upon graduation from Cornell, she accepted a position as the marketing manager for the Pioneer Hotel & Casino, Sahara Resorts. Computers were becoming more widespread and in particular, slot machines were becoming more automated. They didn't have IT positions, but technology was involved in many aspects of marketing, including managing the marketing database, creating offers, etc. "There were few people that understood computers or were

IT for American Casino & Entertainment Properties, she oversees the 40+ person team that handles all technology for their four properties.

As for the future, she is constantly interested and amazed in the ongoing developments with social, mobile and the ever blurring lines between work and home. Cutting-edge technology is not only happening in the workplace. "Often, I'm as fascinated with the technology developments in my personal life, especially since 'playing' with that technology is truly play time. Further, it is often those developments that help manage the balance between my work and personal life."

When asked about today's biggest technology challenges, she imagines many people would put network and data security at the top of their list. However, beyond that, she adds adoption and implementation of new technology. Unlike the workforce of 20 years ago, today's employees are more comfortable with technology, but still they are often wary of change — and depending on the system, change can be much more complicated. "Back when I was implementing PMS systems, we might have had to deal with five or six interfaces. In today's environment, my major systems are pushing 15+ interfaces." ✪

"After years of working on complex projects, both on the user and vendor side, flexibility and adaptability are two of my guiding principles — with both my end-user customers and employee team members. It's important to constantly lead by example and if I can't be flexible and adapt to changing business needs and changing technology solutions, I can't easily ask my business partners nor my employees to be flexible either."

comfortable with them, and I'm certain my technology and analytical background was a major part of helping me land that job. I moved on from there to work for a vendor and manage PMS implementations."

Working for Springer-Miller Systems, she traveled the country completing major installation projects and growing their installation team. Later, she continued traveling while managing technology implementations for Starwood Hotels and Resorts. These early experiences combined to provide her with the breadth of hospitality knowledge she has today.

To support her changing family needs and her husband's frequent relocation, she left Starwood Hotels and started her own company, ForEm Consultants. Her last move was to Las Vegas where she landed back in gaming as a project manager at Caesars Entertainment. Today, as the corporate director of

Written by Lou Cook

Monika Nerger

Global Chief Information Officer
Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group ✦ Hong Kong / San Francisco



Monika Nerger, counts *The Huffington Post's* Arianna Huffington and Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg as great role models for anyone looking to pursue a career in technology. As head of technology, at one of the most globally recognized luxury hotel companies, it's no stretch to include Nerger in that same company.

And like those luminaries, Nerger, too, displays keen sagacity when it comes to the future of technology — particularly its place within hotels, both front and back of house. "Wearable technology and robotics," she says are the future. For example, presently, engineers and housekeepers carry smartphones to receive service requests. "A wristband could communicate the same information more conveniently and more subtly," she says. As for robotics? She refers to Manhattan's Yotel, which has a robotic arm in the lobby to handle luggage. "This is an area of technology I'm watching closely," she says.

Having an understanding of what's around her has helped Nerger, who joined Mandarin Oriental in 2006, achieve the position she holds today (she calls her

"It seems that there is always a flood in the data center, a system interface that doesn't work, some strange bug in a program that never was there before; but when you look at these issues in retrospect it's just another puzzle to solve, which is why I believe many of us choose technology as a profession."

promotion to CIO as something that "literally changed my life"). The marriage of technology and hotels always made perfect sense. "I think I was born with wanderlust in my DNA," she says. "I have always had a need to travel and experience the world." Couple that with her affinity for technology. "The intersection of technology and hospitality was the perfect combination of two passions," she says.

And while leading Mandarin Oriental's technological pursuits can be taxing, luckily for Nerger, she has a talented team to rely on. "People and teamwork trump all," she says. "The skill set is to a large degree secondary, because no one is an expert in all facets of technology, and we are all learning new things continually."

Mandarin Oriental's IT team is as proficient as it is diverse, spread out in 25 countries throughout Europe, the Middle East, North Africa and Asia. This

diversity requires a group that can effectively communicate across cultures, languages and time zones. "I am proud to say my team does this quite well," Nerger says.

And with Mandarin Oriental continuing to open new hotels, Nerger and her team are constantly tasked with making sure the technology is right and it works — lest draw the ire of customers and owners alike.

"Every new hotel opening is a major undertaking requiring exceptional teamwork, and inevitably there will be elements that don't go quite as planned. This is particularly true for technology, which seems to be at the intersection of Murphy's Law and Moore's Law," Nerger says. "But when you look at these issues in retrospect, it's just another puzzle to solve, which is why I believe many of us choose technology as a profession."

When Nerger isn't on the clock, she is quite the musical enthusiast — and, yes, being married to a professional musician has something to do with that. Her husband is Joe Bithorn, who plays the role of George Harrison in *Rain*, one of the most popular and well-known Beatles tribute bands in the country. "Our home is filled with books, music, instruments and a lot of laughter," she says. "That makes everything worthwhile." ✦

Written by David Eisen

Vanessa Ogle

Chief Executive Officer
Enseo, Inc. ✦ Richardson, Texas



Technology and innovation have been constants in Vanessa Ogle's life. Her father began working in technology during the mid-'70s, and both her parents were entrepreneurial. During vacations, Vanessa worked in the family business and some of her first bosses later became employees in her own company Enseo, Inc.

As a 29-year old business, marketing and Spanish graduate from the University of Texas at Austin, Ogle was a vice president and general manager of STB systems. In 2000, she founded Enseo, a provider of in-room entertainment and digital signage for hospitality, retail, healthcare, government, and stadiums and arenas. And, she started the technology company one year before a major market meltdown.

Despite this inauspicious beginning, Enseo has thrived, and now powers more than 1.7 million hotel rooms. Their initial consumer product was the first electronic program guide, the TV Guide Channel. "We were also selling product to both On Command Video and Lodgenet to power their video on de-

" My favorite part of hospitality is the way hoteliers collaborate with vendor partners to bring the best product and experience to the guest. Hotel companies and vendors get in the same room and all brainstorm what kinds of innovation would bring value to their organizations and their guests. It is a unique level of sharing that brings the best products to market."

mand systems to hotels and JetBlue, and Frontier Airline for Airline Seatback Entertainment." Then the events of 9/11 struck hard and Enseo lost ALL their business. Ogle says, "We quickly re-purposed our technology into a solution to fit the digital signage and cinema business and would not have survived if not for a partnership with AMC theaters."

Today Enseo faces the "fantastic" challenge of new growth. "Our corporate culture is what makes us successful, and I am determined to grow carefully and to make sure new members of the Enseo team will keep our core values of integrity, innovation and inspiration." Ogle says her job is pretty simple. Listen to what technologies are available, listen to what the customer wants, then execute and deliver. "The trick is to keep doing this over and over again."

At the moment Ogle is particularly enthusiastic about Coax cable. Enseo will take what appears to be "a boring piece of black cable" found in every hotel room and enable guests to stream their own content from the cloud directly to their guestroom. "It will revolutionize the guest experience."

Ogle's favorite part of hospitality is the collaboration between various hotel companies and their partner vendors. "It is a unique level of sharing and partnership that brings the best products to market."

While she has faced many challenges, she believes that not being a man is not one of them. Once during a business coaching session, a male coach criticized not the content of her presentation, but her hair "too curly" and her smile "too much." Present at the time was a female bank president, who drawled "Bullsh**!! Vanessa, you are here because of who you are...don't listen to those men, just be yourself!" Now she watches with awe the industry's leading ladies. "They handle themselves with such poise, professionalism and remain authentic to who they are while they lead." ✦

Written by Lou Cook

Valyn Perini

Consultant
Acton, Mass.

Valyn Perini's entry into the technology field came when she was working as a function space diary clerk for a hotel with 35,000 sq. ft. of meeting space. When the diary was about to be automated, she became the project manager, overseeing the implementation and training of the application at the pilot hotel, then at all of the group's hotels in North America.

Of course the technologies she sees today within the travel and hospitality technology space are different than those early automation days. But she says the challenges themselves haven't changed much. "What I faced then is the same as today: keeping up with and managing the speed of change, being open to new ideas and unafraid of new technologies. A curious mind and a solid network of smart colleagues and peers are the most effective methods I know to overcome IT challenges," she advises.

Perini, who was at OpenTravel Alliance, and worked at PriceWaterhouseCoopers and Swissôtel, takes the "curious mind" mandate seriously. When asked about best practices for running an IT department in a field that is constantly

"The challenges haven't changed much; what I faced then are the same as today — keeping up with and managing the speed of change, being open to new ideas and unafraid of new technologies. A curious mind and a solid network of smart colleagues and peers are the most effective methods I know to overcome IT challenges."

evolving, she invokes that same quest for knowledge: "Hire people smarter than you, then learn all you can from them. Read, read, read and listen, listen, listen. I love to attend conferences and events because I always learn something that changes the way I look at a commercial or technology challenge. Closting ourselves in our offices and never raising our eyes to the horizon leads to technological and professional myopia," she says.

While she doesn't like fixating on the role of gender in her work life, she does think that attending a women's liberal arts college (Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Ga.), where the emphasis was on critical thinking and written and verbal communication skills, was helpful. "Those skills have allowed me to interact successfully with almost anyone — male or female, junior or senior, American or Swiss, Silicon Valley or Omaha, hotel executive or airline executive — at all points in my career."



While she's a hard worker with decades of experience, Perini hasn't let the fun aspects of the hospitality industry pass her by. "My favorite part of this industry is the travel, hands down. I couldn't believe my luck when I started traveling internationally for Swissôtel. To be able to see the world and make friends with the locals who were my colleagues and do it on someone else's dime. What could possibly be better than that?"

She cites those strong friendships and mentors she's made among her best memories during her career. "Once I made a home for myself in the travel industry, I discovered how generous my peers and seniors were, and still are."

Her mental photo album includes some vantage points that would have been hard to see if she had chosen another career, including "riding the trains in Switzerland between hotel implementations in Zurich, Basel and Montreux to drinking champagne in a limo at the New York Hotel Show to hiking the Great Wall with an international coterie of co-workers."

In her off hours, she cheers for two baseball teams — the Red Sox and the Braves — takes photos with cameras with actual film, skis, bicycles and even enjoys shoveling snow. ★

Written by Margaret Littman

Sophie Pommois

Project Director Global Distribution
GHA — Global Hotel Alliance ★ Geneva, Switzerland



It is hard not to get lost in a sea, mountain or information highway of information. Sophie Pommois knows. “We have so much information available. It is easy however to get lost in too much and unstructured data.” But Pommois, who speaks five languages (French, English, German, Spanish and Italian), and thus juggles more information in more tongues than most people, has one secret word to help IT professionals deal with all that data overload: document.

“Keep control of what you do: document,” she urges. “Documenting your actions is extremely important from the configuration and change tracking point of view. When you work with multiple systems — with thousands of settings — you can’t just change a configuration without documenting it.” And, she adds, the process must be clear for everyone on your team. “Any change in system settings can have consequences, some of which appear days or months later. If you don’t document, you can’t go back.”

In one previous job, Pommois says she was called a “control freak” for her tendency to encourage her team to update documentation immediately. But she

“I think managing big data is a new science in our hospitality profession and future performance of brands/companies will be defined by their level of expertise in this domain. We have so much information available, but may not be able to use it properly... We need to simplify the consolidation and the display of it, and integration between different systems, platforms and external sources of data is the defining key element.”

had her reasons. “Documentation done wrong means that you will encounter a day when errors boomerang back to you, resulting in lost time and interrupted business processes.”

Documentation also helps what Pommois sees as the top challenge for hospitality IT professionals today: the wide cross-section of different systems and, therefore, systems integration. “We are all speaking about industry standards, but it is very difficult to have the vendors implementing those standards. That’s why the prominence of the company for which you are working is important: You have to push, push, push those vendors to go ahead,” she says. “Otherwise, it will never happen.”

Pommois made her way into hospitality IT when searching for an internship while studying at the Ecole Hôtelière de Lausanne and there were some

new (at that time) opportunities within technology. Upon graduation, the founder of Fidelio, Dietmar Mueller-Elmau offered her a job based in Munich. That was in 1989, during the early days of Fidelio, and was a life-changing experience. During that time she acted as a first-time-ambassador for Fidelio in many countries around the world. “At the early stages I felt a bit insecure, being a young woman with no operational hotel background coming out of the hotel school,” she remembers. “After you prove what you can do, there is no issue.”

A hobbyist sailor on Switzerland’s Lake Geneva in her free time, Pommois likes the sport because of its purity: “You cannot hide anything on a boat; there is no space for insincerity.”

And she is equally pragmatic as a leader when it comes to helping her teams to resolve issues. As is the case in any industry, she says, there are constantly problems to be solved. She makes sure her team takes all sides of a solution into consideration before it is implemented, thanks to pro and con lists, and encourages her staff to stick with their decisions.

You do not want to abandon too fast, if you don’t see any resolution right away, she cautions. “Most of the time, there is a way.” ★

Written by Margaret Littman

Connie Rheams

Senior Vice President and GM North America
Indra Company ✦ Miami, Fla.



Working as an executive for Indra, the third largest IT company in Europe, certainly is a great and responsible job, but is not what Rheams planned. At age 19, she yearned to work on a cruise ship and had secretly applied for a position. She wanted to explore the world. Rheams confided in her sister who suggested a career with the airlines, but she couldn't see herself in that role. At that time Rheams was attending college and working part-time in her brother-in-law's hardware store. One day destiny arrived in the form of a vacuum-cleaner.

A customer came in, bought the vacuum and paid by a check with an American Airlines logo. The purchaser was responsible for American's reservations center in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. Rheams requested a job application. The company hired her, and she spent her next 14 years with American Airlines. "I didn't know I wanted to be in hospitality until I got a taste of the travel industry."

Tom Boorman, a former managing director for American, became her mentor. "He helped shape the business woman I am today. He taught me how to

" Whether working in IT for a hotel company or developing IT for a hotel company, continuous improvement and delivering innovation quicker must drive us. The market is moving quickly, and we have to figure out a way to stay on pace. I would challenge all companies to spend more time on innovation versus maintenance, and have an open vision for alternatives."

lead a team, always stressing the importance of treating members with respect, giving them the courage to share their ideas, creating ownership, providing a setting to encourage creativity, and making the workplace fun and stimulating."

After 10 years, American asked Rheams to run the hospitality division of TeleService Resources, a division of Sabre. "My team of 500+ provided GDS/channel connectivity and call center services, as well as central reservation system to hotel groups." Since Rheams would inherit the new system, she became actively involved in design and function. She says, "Before long hotel technology became a passion of mine, and I quickly became an advocate of pushing technology forward to deliver end-to-end processes with a slant of supporting sales and marketing efforts."

"The Wild-Wild-West nature of hotel technology also amazes me, and it's this niche that I found myself drawn to. As an industry, we have only scratched

the surface when it comes to automation." She sees endless opportunities to drive the guest experience with technology, streamline operations with automation, to use all sources of data to manage offers and personalization, and interact with personal media brought by guests.

One of the biggest challenges she faces is getting people to think differently in terms of their approach to technology. After spending decades juggling disparate systems and trying to establish industry standards for multiple vendors, she's become a proponent of taking a more holistic approach. This involves adopting a platform strategy and building multiple applications on top of that platform. "There is bona fide research showing that hotel groups which have adopted this approach are experiencing big wins in efficiency, customer experience, costs reductions and the ability to be far more agile."

Looking at today's technology developments, Rheams has an eye toward the convergence of big data and business intelligence interests. "I am curious to see how the technology-driven information will enable our industry to have a more complete picture of each guest from structured and unstructured data and create personalized experiences along with new revenue opportunities." ✦

Written by Lou Cook

HITEC 2014 Special Report

Ursula Rhode

Chief Operating Officer
Genares Worldwide Reservation Services ✦ Irving, Texas



Ursula Rhode describes herself as a highly driven and a seasoned operational professional with detailed hotel, electronic distribution, sales and travel management on a global basis. She came to Genares as an executive vice president in 2006 and has become a well-respected and proven industry leader, and an expert in strategic and tactical planning and implementation. Rhode is the decision maker for all facets of operations, including business development, IT, account management, marketing, vendor negotiations, and developing partnerships with suppliers and OTAs. Her responsibilities cover electronic distribution through the Global Distribution Systems and the Internet.

Born in Bad Nauheim, Germany, she looked to her brother when deciding where to direct her career path after earning a bachelor's degree with a business focus. Her brother worked for TWA, and Rhode envied the exotic places he visited. Emulating him, she began working for United Airlines, training travel agents to use computers for selling hotels, a completely new concept for the agents. "They barely knew how to use computers for booking air."

"As we look forward to what's coming down the pipeline, I am interested in how we'll overcome localization constraints. A huge amount of quality content will be created throughout the world at high speeds. It will need to be converted to local language, adopted to local cultural expressions and meet regulatory norms."

Her favorite part of the industry is the constant change, never a dull moment. "You have to embrace the changes and move forward."

She had always been fascinated by computers. Wanting to learn more, she began working for THISCO (now Pegasus) since they were known for their unique switch in communication with the various GDS and were early pioneers of using the Web for booking travel.

As a female looking to advance in a predominately male environment filled with good ole Texas boy mentality, she established a work ethic that helped her rise to the COO position. Rhode says it was the ultimate test of her patience, and she learned the importance of having a solution in mind before addressing an issue, in never giving up, staying positive and treating

others as she liked to be treated. "In one of my first management jobs, my best advice came from a boss who told me that I should never expect people to work with the same drive I had, but to set the example and to understand that everyone was not going to be a super achiever."

Leadership and teamwork are important, and Rhode operates with an open door policy. "I told each one of my team members. If you make a mistake, don't try and hide it, but let's try to fix it together. We had a situation where we had to migrate 900 hotels in one day. We had established a core group that met every week, did the gap analysis, had a project plan, assigned different responsibilities and followed them up every week. We had a successful migration without a hitch."

Rhode's challenges as a top female professional have changed in the course of her career. She says that being a minority means having to go an extra mile to find your place in the broader culture. Taking time to explain yourself and to listen more carefully. Provide positive feedback and help people understand that women add a different perspective, which needs to be considered. She notes, "Don't tell me how the clock was built. How do we keep it running?" ✦

Written by Lou Cook

Kris Singleton

Chief Information Officer
The Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas ★ Las Vegas



Kris Singleton did not start her tech career in hotels and casinos, but in an altogether different feel-good industry: greeting cards. Post-graduation from Central Missouri State University, where she earned a bachelor's of science in CIS and Management, she established her IT background with Hallmark Cards in a variety of positions including client-server development, IT staff and end-user training and application support. But with the tragic terrorist attacks of September 11, Singleton's husband, an ex-secret service agent, was called upon to help with the expansion of the Federal Air Marshal Service. A change that moved them from their home in the Midwest to Las Vegas.

While Singleton continued to work with Hallmark remotely, a company that provided great support to their employees and where she had been for 13 years, she missed interacting with people and the camaraderie of working onsite. Looking for her next move, it was only natural to step into gaming and hospitality — no doubt a specialty of Vegas. She was introduced to Scot Campbell, who was the vice president of IT at the MGM Mirage at the time, and was hired.

"Too many times, executives just want to install some technology and think it will be the silver bullet that solves all the issues. It is my responsibility to help them understand that we must start with the goal and focus on the people and process first. Then we can select the right technology that can enable us to meet that goal."

"I think the best thing I gained from Scot was the importance of building a strong relationship with the operations teams. Understanding the core of what we do and communicating how technology enables them to achieve their business goals."

Since then she has gained her footing in the industry with positions at the MGM Mirage, Kimpton Hotels and Resorts and, since 2011, at The Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas.

Her time in the industry has brought on one of her most rewarding and challenging projects, where she had to consolidate 23 properties with different PMS to a single enterprise solution. It took a year of research, investigation and crafting information into meaningful business ROI to reach a unanimous decision. She says, "I learned a great deal from several intelligent executives

about ROI, negotiations and persuasive presentations; along with key technology development and future product strategy that are critical to these important and long standing decisions."

With all the bells and whistles that come in a constantly changing field, Singleton is strong in her conviction to not get lost in the new stuff and be too quick to adopt a technology just for the sake of technology. "Too many times, executives just want to install some technology and think it will be the silver bullet that solves all the issues," she says. "It is my responsibility to help them understand that we must start with the goal and focus on the people and process first. Then we can select the right technology that can enable us to meet that goal."

She also sees the potential to lose focus on data governance with the growing popularity of big data, predictive analysis and cloud technologies. The risk to the influx of these tools is losing sight of the process around data governance to maintain data integrity. "Once you lose the confidence in the accuracy of your data, it becomes worthless. These are huge investments and we need to be smart about data and moving that to information, then to knowledge and finally to wisdom." ★

Written by Eliza Selig

Naomi Stark

President

Stark Service Solutions, LLC ✦ Orlando, Fla.



Growing up in a small New Hampshire town, Naomi Stark dreamed big. As early as high school, she knew she wanted to work in the travel industry. After she vacationed in Hawaii, and experienced real resort hospitality, she narrowed her career goals to hotels and resorts. “What appeals to me the most about hospitality are the ‘serendipitous moments’ that occur all the time. I’ve had the opportunity to meet people from all over the world that I would have never met otherwise,” she explains.

Now president and CEO of Stark Service Solutions, LLC, an Orlando-based consultancy and firm that develops Web-based programs for the industry, which started in 2001. Stark still has her sense of wanderlust, loving to take to the Florida roads with the wind in her hair on a motorcycle. “Both relaxing and exhilarating,” she says, “there is nothing like a ride along the coast.”

Even when faced with the kinds of travel adventures that make some decide to stay home, Stark has prevailed and continued to embrace it all. At HITEC in Austin, Texas in 2011, Stark was a first-time speaker, as well as the incoming

" Hospitality is one of the most far reaching industries on the planet. As a global industry, with global employees and customers, I firmly believe we have a unique opportunity to have a significant impact on our valuable resources — water, power, paper, etc. We have both the opportunity and the responsibility, which few other industries have."

chair of the AH&LA Technology and E-Business Committee. “It was a pretty big event for me professionally,” she remembers. She also remembers — it is hard to forget — that while at dinner with colleagues the night before, she had a severe allergic reaction to what turned out to be bed-bug bites.

“I was soon covered in enormous welts and hives from the neck down and ended up in the ER most of the night.” She took a quick nap in her hotel room before donning a pantsuit to cover the red blotches, and headed for the convention center. “What I learned from this experience is: Life is going to throw you curve balls no matter how prepared you are. There will simply be times you just have to deal with the challenges because failure is not an option.”

Failure certainly has not been the case at Stark Service Solutions. “Since the introduction of social media and online reviews, our Web-based tools have

become even more popular,” she says. “For example, one client has recently been recognized for all but eliminating their guest complaints, averaging just one complaint to every 7,500 reservations. We love how our technology has played a part in the advancement of guest satisfaction and hotelier success.”

Of course, it wasn’t always easy. “When we started out, mobile device and smartphones didn’t exist. With most hospitality employees not being computer-facing, it was a stretch for our clients to see how they could benefit from our software tools. Technology has since advanced significantly, yet even today there is still some hesitation to automate what have long been paper-based manual systems.”

Looking forward, Stark hopes to move more clients to paperless systems, with a particular interest in sustainable and green initiatives. “Seeing technology improve how we use our resources and reduce waste is of absolute interest to me. For example, I recently stayed at the Omni Dallas hotel, I was much more excited about having to use my key card to ‘power up’ the electricity in my room than I was about the type of TV that was in the room.” ✦

Written by Margaret Littman

Menka Uttamchandani

Vice President of Business Intelligence
Denihan Hospitality Group ✦ New York City



"Our industry has no shortage of data, leveraging data enables us to take smart, calculated risks. Not using data is blind risk, like flying a plane without cockpit controls," says Menka Uttamchandani. Uttamchandani isn't one to fly blind.

Managing the business intelligence (BI) practice at Denihan Hospitality Group, Uttamchandani works in tandem with the company's revenue management, sales, marketing and operations teams, using strategic and tactical analytics, reporting and dashboarding to help drive revenues, manage costs and guide strategic direction.

Denihan's BI practice was lauded in 2013 by IBM as a smarter analytics customer success story. The company's efforts were also featured as one of five companies with esteemed BI practices in *Profiles in Performance*, a book written by Howard Dresner (aka, "the father of BI").

She cites collaboration across functions and leveraging the strengths of her own talented team members as being vital to Denihan's BI success.

"One big challenge today is the huge volume and variety of data and another big challenge is data coming from disparate/new and legacy systems. Not only does this data need to talk to each other appropriately, but the big data explosion of the recent years necessitates a greater need for both better visualization to easily grasp the message/trend in large volumes of data and also to identify what data to focus on."

One of Uttamchandani's most memorable projects when she arrived at Denihan was the "Win Back" project she initiated to incent previous guests to stay again at Denihan hotels. By analyzing and then reaching out to repeat guests who had a lapse in return visits, Uttamchandani worked across multiple disciplines to lead the effort that resulted in a resounding 300 percent ROI and significant return visits among Denihan's most loyal customers.

Even after years in both hotels and at the corporate level, Uttamchandani finds analytics satisfying, and recognizes challenges that have been a constant throughout her career. Today, as was the case when Uttamchandani began her work in hospitality technology working in database marketing at Hyatt Interna-

tional in Hong Kong, she thinks about data integrity. "The data that goes into the systems determines the reliability and breadth of data; and hence value and potential of effective analysis. Establishing coding, mapping, data integrity awareness and insight into how business processes affect the data is key" she says.

According to Uttamchandani, today's analytics present their own hurdles. "Challenges today include the volume, variety and veracity of data, as well as data from disparate systems. Not only is it critical that these data sources connect suitably, but the 'big data' explosion of the recent years necessitates a greater need for identifying on which data to focus and for superior visualization to discern meaning in large volumes of data," she said.

Uttamchandani expertly weaves her way through the dynamic tech world thanks, in part, to a piece of advice she was given from Ananya Narayan, a mentor with whom she worked at Hyatt International earlier in her career. As they sliced and diced data, he advised her, "Always use the 'So What' check. Ask yourself: What will we do with this information? Is it going to change what we do?" According to Uttamchandani, the answer to that question helps set priorities and separates the need to know from the nice-to-know. ✦

Yvette Vincent, CHTP

Senior Director of Information Systems
Delaware North Companies, Inc. ✦ Buffalo, N.Y.



Yvette Vincent was vacationing in New Orleans with her husband and two small children in August 2005. After having a great time on a weeklong trip on the American Queen steamboat (which at the time was owned by Delaware North Companies, Vincent's employer), they had planned to spend the weekend in the Crescent City before flying out on August 29. That, of course was the day Hurricane Katrina made landfall and all plans changed.

Vincent's family learned that flights were cancelling as reports of the storm intensified. Rental cars quickly sold out. So, they made it back onto the American Queen, which got out just before the city closed down. While they were safe, local cell towers went out early that fateful Monday, so there was very little communication or information to provide to the ship's staff regarding the tragedies unfolding for their hometown and families on shore.

Looking back, Vincent is grateful for the skills and compassion of Captain John Duggar, his wife and crew, as well as the insight their professionalism and the whole experience provided her back at work.

"The mindset change in how new technology is developed and funded has my interest. Open Source has been around for some time, but the rise of crowd funding is producing or expanding some new game changers: Adapteva is working through low power, consumer priced supercomputing; Oculus Rift can change not only the gaming experience, but also associate training and consumer experiences; and 3D printing has unlimited possibilities."

"This experience taught me that people come first, and IT can be used to provide geographically disperse business continuity to support both customer and associate needs," says Vincent.

An open book to her friends, family and co-workers, Vincent is an adept networker and collaborator, as was made clear during one of her favorite projects, the selection of a reservation system, which required working with a variety of hospitality leaders.

"This involved obtaining requirements and buy-in across many departments, both vertically and horizontally: setting selection criteria, creating data standards and new system procedures, and developing sustainable processes and standards bodies to maintain them and drive system value," she says. The implementation was a collaborative effort.

Vincent got to her leadership role in the hospitality industry through technology. "I had worked in IT application developer positions for non-customer facing technology, so the move into a hospitality IT position where the technology would also benefit the customer directly sounded exciting," she remembers of her move 17 years ago. "This is still the best part of the industry to me. I get to impact technology to make the guest experience even better."

When Vincent graduated from college with a computer degree, she hadn't worked with personal computers or the Internet, as both those technologies were new at the time. A curious lifelong learner, she has adapted and stayed ahead of the curve, in part through activities with associations such as HFTP and HTNG. Looking forward, she's particularly interested in crowdfunding, Open Source and other ways that new technology is being funded.

Whether at work or off-the-clock, Vincent jumps in with both feet. Before becoming a mom, she competed in international style ballroom and Latin dancing with an amateur partner. Whether on vacation or at the office, she's clear in her focus: "The best piece of advice I ever got was to always stay true to my opinions, support them with objectivity and fact, and don't get discouraged if others don't agree." ✦

Jing Zhu

President and CEO
3D Networks China Co., Ltd. ★ Beijing, China



There's no questioning why Jing Zhu, has been such a success story in the mostly male-dominated business of technology. It's her parents, naturally. They reared her to believe that she was the same as everyone else, and could succeed in anything she put her mind to. Confidence was never an issue for her. "I was taught by my parents from a young age that females are no different from males," she says.

Zhu took it from there, excelling in the classroom among her predominantly male peers. "There were, indeed, very few girls in the classroom, but I was always in the top three every year with outstanding student awards," she says.

In fact, she thinks women have a leg up often in the workplace. "There is an advantage of being the female in a leadership position, in particular in hospitality," she says. "Females have better communication skills in many aspects."

Zhu always knew she wanted a career in technology; in fact, no other pursuit, she says, ever crossed her mind. In order to achieve her goal, Zhu studied computer science and telecommunications at Beijing University.

"I continue to address bringing advanced foreign hospitality technology and products into China and adapting them to be suitable for the Chinese hospitality industry environment. I try to lead our company in working out more creative and innovative IT end-to-end solutions through frequent international cooperation to illustrate to Chinese hoteliers what's available and gain their trust."

She joined 3D Networks China in 2005 and has been credited for her contributions and innovation within the hospitality segment. Her biggest challenge now is equipping China's hotels with the technology needed to compete on a global scale. "My challenge is bringing advanced foreign hospitality technology and products into China and making them suitable for the Chinese hospitality industry environment," she says. It's also about educating Chinese hoteliers, "helping them understand the significance of technology for the industry," Zhu says.

Like her American counterparts, she keeps abreast of the latest technology, paying special attention to that which is applicable to the hotel industry. "I have kept pace in exploring the best technologies for the industry, including the cloud, mobility, wearable technologies and cross-over platforms," she says.

She adds that these are the areas where her company has made the biggest investments.

Beyond her own merit, Zhu had help along the way through a cast of mentors and role models. Today, she looks to give back. As the chairperson of the non-profit China Hospitality Technology Alliance, one of her goals is to help and cultivate the young generation of technological talent in China.

One of Zhu's biggest leadership moments came when working on the opening of The Venetian Macao, a project the company won in 2010. Problem was 3D Networks' Macao office wasn't set up and there were almost no local resources that could be used. "As company and sales team leader, I mobilized resources and technical backup from 3D Networks' Hong Kong, Shenzhen, Guangzhou and Beijing offices to build up a specialized project team for The Venetian Macao." The team included members for sales, technology consulting, customer service, project management, purchasing and supply chain departments. She says: "Everyone's task and responsibility were defined very clearly to guarantee every question and requirement from the customer could be responded to and met the first time. Excellent teamwork made the impossible, possible." ★

Written by David Eisen