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2004

South Africa's

# Leading Managers

2004



**NAME AND SURNAME**  
Suzanne Ravenall

**COMPANY NAME**  
IDCS Holdings (Pty) Ltd

**BUSINESS TITLE**  
Chief executive officer

**JOB DESCRIPTION**  
Responsible for strategic direction of IDCS and day-to-day running of the company

**AGE**  
35

**YEARS OF EXPERIENCE**  
17

**ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS**  
Seven O-levels, Stratton School in Bedfordshire, England

**FIRST JOB**  
Hogg Robinson Travel (United Kingdom)

**MENTORS**  
'Each and every person you come into contact with can teach you something'

**TIME-OUT ACTIVITIES**  
Being at home, spending time with her dogs, reading, travelling

**FAVOURITE TOYS**  
Her dogs and sports cars

**FAMILY SITUATION**  
Single

**RETIREMENT DESTINATION**  
'Life is too short to keep all those dreams for when you retire, rather live them now.' She sees herself living close to a beach at some point in her life.



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PHOTO: TREVOR FISH



## Executing outsourcing solutions

COLLEEN NAUDÉ

### MANAGEMENT STYLE AND QUALITIES

Suzanne Ravenall, who founded IDCS in 1997, always wanted to start her own company and build something unique. 'And I wanted to build an environment where people could realise their own potential,' she says.

She spotted a gap in the market around the provision of outsourced implementation services. Up to 98% of people recruited into all organisations around the world are recruited for their managerial/technical competencies, yet shareholders value strategy implementation way above strategy itself, says Ravenall.

'IDCS steps in and executes the business plans or strategies, then goes one step further and manages that particular element to make sure that the business result remains sustainable.'

**GREAT PEOPLE, GREAT COMPANY**  
Suzanne Ravenall believes in making people shine, and allowing her staff – great people – to give of their best. 'This really thrills me.'

**COMPANY PROFILE**  
 IDCS HOLDINGS  
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**TYPE OF BUSINESS**  
 Outsourcing operations  
 implementation company  
 – sustainable business  
 transformation or straight  
 outsource

'Some of the results IDCS has achieved include an instance where we reduced the input documents for a payroll department by 75%, the operating headcount by 25%, the queries by 70% and the error ratio from 15% to 1% per month.'

According to Ravenall, the discipline of execution is the new 'heat wave' being talked about in business. 'As I often say to my staff, no amount of strategy is ever a replacement for sound execution.'

To make sure recruits at IDCS hit the ground running, they are 'put through hell' during a stringent induction process from five days to six weeks. Apart from this 'initiation', employees are constantly trained and developed, and a successor is identified for every position.

Ravenall, an avid reader, says Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great* states that out of the Fortune Top 500 companies only a startlingly small amount have outperformed the market by three times during his study. 'It is noteworthy that most, if not all, had homegrown CEOs. The homegrown CEO is definitely becoming a new trend, in a move away from the idea of sourcing someone from outside a company,' says Ravenall.

### 'Shareholders value strategy implementation way above strategy itself.'

She says another myth highlighted in the book is that good people are a company's most valuable asset – great people are actually a company's best asset. As a result, Ravenall would rather leave a position vacant for a longer period until the right person is found. During the interim there are always other ways that this particular position can be managed. 'For this reason we have a low staff turnover, although we cull a mistake quickly. But we don't get rid of people indiscriminately – it is often far more rewarding to make sure that someone is used in the right capacity.'



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**COMPETITIVE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT**  
 Ravenall says IDCS has no direct competitors. When she started the company in 1997, the marketplace did not understand or see the need for operations execution. The marketplace has subsequently changed dramatically. The speed of implementation and the rate at which companies are required to implement strategy and achieve results has quadrupled, leaving organisations with little capacity to keep up the pace of implementation to achieve the required results.

The company was born with one customer which is still a client. IDCS's growth strategy has always been to focus on large clients, although it is considering developing a workable solution to accommodate the market for small and medium enterprises.

The company helps clients implement the outcomes it has identified in a strategic document, business plan or departmental plan within given timeframes.

IDCS uses Total Quality Management Processes, or TQM (best practice processes and methodologies) underpinned by a strong IT infrastructure (the company has been awarded the BSI ISO 9001:2000 accreditation for quality) to ensure that clients' objectives are met. IDCS is a Microsoft solutions provider and operates at a CMM level of 4.



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She adds: 'One of our roles is to make people shine, to get the best out of them. This really thrills me.'

Ravenall believes in the quiet leader. 'The days of the leader with the huge ego are numbered. The focus is shifting to the manager who quietly gets the job done. This is the leader of tomorrow, not the one whose main driver is to continuously be in the limelight.'

To achieve that, she admits to a leadership style that is tough and brutally honest. 'There is not one employee who will tell you that he or she doesn't know where they stand with me.'

Ravenall believes honesty in corporate South Africa and the rest of the world has improved during the 12 years she has been in the country, and she believes that new legislation will contribute to business becoming increasingly transparent. But that means the jobs of non-executive directors are becoming all the more onerous. 'The heightened awareness of these aspects is a direct result of the Enrons of the world and is fuelled by books and conferences on corporate governance issues.'

She is unemotional on business issues, although this does not rule out her being sensitive towards people.

'I'm democratic 90% of the time, the other 10% – when you have to arrive at a decision quickly – it is often necessary to be autocratic.'

Ravenall, who lives in Kyalami, loves spending time at home with her dogs and has a variety of interests, from fast and furious sports, like motor racing (she drives a Porsche) to lately finding the pleasures of gardening. 'I might not be the expert yet, but I'm learning.'

Ravenall believes humility and humour are two key ingredients of life.

'Never be too big to learn from others – we are in fact no better than the person sitting next to us.'

'Learn to laugh at yourself and don't beat yourself up every time you make a mistake – but don't make the same mistake again.'

Operations execution outsourcing services are offered in labour broking, field services, training academies, human resources, and back office administration.

IDCS has a holistic product and service offering that manages an end-to-end solution completely.

Currently a private company, IDCS does not publish its results, but has experienced massive growth in its last financial year, and has assets exceeding R20m. The company expects to grow profits by at least 105% in the next financial year.

IDCS sees the positive integration of diversity and the fullest utilisation of South Africa's variety of talents as one of the country's biggest challenges. Thus, it endeavours to address the issues of racial inequality in the society in various human resources policy documents and through its value system and management targets.

IDCS has been singled out as one of the best companies to work for (2002/3 and 2003/4), was included as one of the most promising companies (2003/4) and was voted one of the Top 300 companies in South Africa (2002/3) by the Department of Trade and Industry.



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#### REASONS FOR EXCELLENCE

Ravenall believes execution is a key job of the business leader. 'Many business leaders like to think that the top dog is exempt from the details of actually running things. It's a really nice way to look at leadership: you stand at the top of the mountain thinking strategically and attempting to inspire your people with visions, while managers do the grunt work. But this way of thinking is a fallacy. An organisation can only execute strategy if the leader's heart and soul are immersed in the company.'

She says leading is more than thinking big, and notes that execution requires a comprehensive understanding of the business, its people and the environment. Only the business leader is in a position to achieve this understanding through deep personal involvement.

Ravenall says the new leaders are the humble, honest people who are able to look honestly at themselves and their companies, to make realistic decisions for the good of the business.

'I am working myself out of a job, but if I hadn't I would not have been doing my job,' says Ravenall, referring to her company's black empowerment initiative which will result in IDCS becoming a black-owned company.

'It took me two years to figure out why black economic empowerment does not work in South Africa, a country that I'm more passionate about than the place I come from (Bedfordshire, UK),' says Ravenall.

'I wanted to learn from the mistakes made by others, and this has led me to believe in the current strategy.' She says too many companies have been paying lip service by inviting black partners to step into the business but then asking them operationally to keep their distance, thinking that anything vaguely resembling a BEE venture is just to open doors.

#### LOOKING FORWARD

IDCS is in the process of getting shareholders into the company and has agreed on the structure upfront. Once the new

According to Ravenall, the company is unique in the market in its provision of total operational implementation solutions, thus leaving it with no direct competition in South Africa in terms of its specific toolkit and method of deployment.

'Outsourcing has had its problems, in that there have been some failures in the market which always make people sceptical. Equally, there have been fantastic successes and I guess these are not always as highly publicised as they should be,' says Ravenall.

#### LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL CHALLENGES

IDCS has embarked on an internal expansion strategy to take its products and services into international markets. The company intends creating a franchise model and launching itself worldwide by finding the right franchisee partners in the right markets.

This expansion forms part of the company's long-term vision of becoming the global leader in operational implementation.

control structure is in place, it will be well placed to become the dominant player in the outsourcing space in terms of quality not only in South Africa, but also worldwide, says Ravenall. 'My role will increasingly change to building this vision after having been involved in developing an "implementation toolkit" with much blood, sweat and tears.' She adds that international expansion is not without considerable risks but the franchise model that IDCS is adopting will mitigate some of these.

'Taking a services company globally is not a simple matter and IDCS will learn from experience and gradually grow the business.' A share incentive scheme, eventually enabling all employees to acquire shares in the company, is being implemented. IDCS had 100% growth over the past year and predicts strong profit growth in the future.



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