

Jonna Ward, VIP

Very Impressive Person

By Patricia Kutza

"For us to compete against the big guys, we have to go global. It's an economy of scale we can't afford to ignore. Do you pay \$12,000 for a programmer overseas versus \$125,000 for one in the States?"

— Jonna Ward, CEO, Visionary Integration Professionals

Being about 5 feet tall was one thing. But being short, 29, and poised to take on behemoths such as Andersen Consulting was a challenge of another magnitude. Yet that tall order faced Jonna Ward when she left her comfortable job with Andersen (now [Accenture](http://accenture.com)) in 1996 to form consulting company Visionary Integration Professionals LLC.

As sunlight fills the spacious conference room of her Folsom-based headquarters, Ward remembers those seminal years with Andersen. "During the early '90s, when major consulting firms like Andersen were staffed primarily by men, I was less focused on the rarity of my gender than on dealing with the double bias of my height and my age," she notes.

"I compensated by wearing my hair up to appear older since my peers were, on average, at least 20 years older than I was. I always dressed well and stayed focused on the task at hand. In retrospect, I think I overprepared and outworked my colleagues, but I always wanted to be able to speak with substance."

With VIP in its 10th year and revenues totaling \$60 million projected for 2006, it's obvious that its CEO has little time or reason to fret about her height. Even so, her smartly tailored goldenrod suit shows she still recognizes the importance of sartorial perfection.

Ward's company has managed to thrive amid the three hurdles that triggered the demise of other companies in her niche: the aftermath of 9/11, the dotcom bust, and the year 2000 surge and decline. Her thoughts are dominated these days by how to maintain momentum.

Out-Nationalize, Out-Localize

"VIP is a midmarket player in the technology-consulting space that is able to out-nationalize the small boutique firms that lack the bandwidth to support the strategic business needs of our clients," Ward notes. "We've also

been able to out-localize the multibillion dollar big guys who often don't have local faces to put to their name."

With nine offices around the country, VIP is somewhat buffered from local and regional economic change, says Ward. A couple of years ago, she altered her client portfolio so that VIP relies on a 50/50 split of revenue from government and commercial-sector clients. The ratio is a departure from 2003, when nearly all VIP's revenues came from government customers.

Recently acquired for their commercial-sector clients, Pinnacle Bay Resource Group (Sacramento), Cornerstone Consulting (Minneapolis) and Core Integration Partners (Denver) are critical to her business plan.

To assimilate these firms' corporate cultures and geographic locations into the present VIP structure represents Ward's biggest challenge. Tina Johnston, recently named enterprise inte-


gration manager, is charged with this task. "One of my primary goals will be to ensure a seamless transition while being respectful of our acquired organizations' core values," says Johnston.

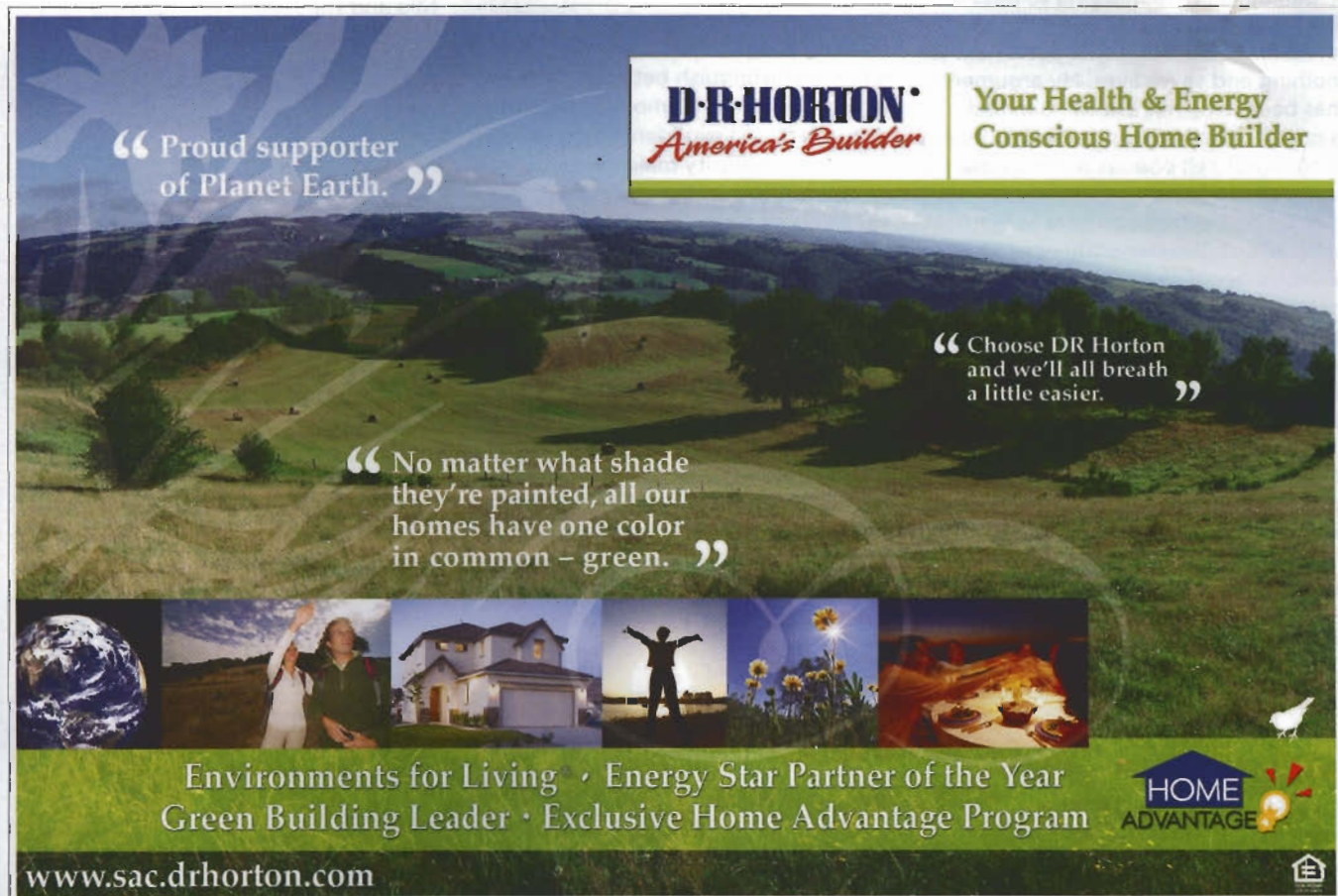
Ward says this goal reflects the advice she received from her former colleague and mentor Ken Dineen, who still works for Andersen. "He taught me that what matters in business is caring for your clients and your staff as people. If you do that well, the rest will take care of itself."

The specter of global competition also lurks. "The pressure of globalization is very real," says Ward. "We don't outsource our talent right now. But for us to compete against the big guys, we have to go global. It's an economy of scale we can't afford to ignore. Do you pay \$12,000 for a programmer overseas versus \$125,000 for one in the States?"

Ward is focused on the opportunities created by the business-intel-

ligence sector. Data-mining tools and data warehouses now allow companies to collect incredibly diverse information about their processes. "The biggest opportunity we see is that businesses have all this valuable data and yet don't know what to do with it," she says. "We are currently working with a prosthetic-device manufacturer, prototyping solutions that will leverage the data produced by devices such as pacemakers."

VIP's challenges would be enough to give many CEOs sleepless hours, but Ward takes sustenance from spending time with her husband Roger, a "stay-at-home dad and aspiring artist-sushi chef" and their two children, Jacob and Alexis, ages 8 and 4 (respectively). "I'm good at compartmentalizing," she adds, "so I sleep very well at night. I recognize that I always have more than I can ever possibly do." 



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