

A Well-Oiled Machine

An Interview with Vanessa Smith,
Co-Chief of Staff to the Chief Executive Officer, SAP



Vanessa Smith

EDITORS' NOTE Vanessa Smith has held her current post since June 2014. Prior to this, she was Executive Director, Global Value Management; Senior Principal, Office of the CEO; and Senior Principal, Value Engineering. She was also a Solutions Marketing Manager for GE; Solution Marketing Manager for GXS; and Associate at A.T. Kearney. She graduated with an M.B.A. from the University of Maryland and a B.S. from the University of Virginia.

How do you focus your efforts within your role?

When I look at the Chief of Staff role for Bill (McDermott, Chief Executive Officer), I help determine his priorities, how he spends his time, and what his message is going to be, and make sure we get a return on the investment on his valuable time.

There is a strategic element in terms of identifying what our platform is for this year or this timeframe; there is the operational piece on how to align his time, be it internal or external with that platform and what we want to drive; and there is an administrative piece as well.

We have to be a well-oiled machine from strategy to operations and execution to ensure we're driving those key messages, the SAP brand, and Bill's brand.

From the inside, what makes SAP so special?

One is culture and two is our bold strategy. From a culture perspective, ours is one of inclusiveness, innovation, and putting the customer at the heart of everything we do. We drive an environment where coming up with new ideas and quick cycles of trial and error help us arrive at the most innovative results, be it product initiatives or human resources initiatives. Bill came up through the ranks in our sales and our field organizations, and has implemented a culture that has helped significantly.

On the strategy front, five years ago we set out a bold ambition that has been tweaked over time to become a cloud company covered by HANA. We knew it would be hard but we are dedicated to becoming an amazing growth company. We could not be here without having a leader like Bill willing to take the risks.

What opportunities have you seen for women at SAP?

I'm female but also African-American. I've been with the company for so long because they value my thoughts, my strategy, my opinions, and my leadership capabilities. In an industry that is often dominated by men, they were willing to give me visibility and opportunity in my career, and an extra chance to make a difference within SAP.

In addition, we put the numbers behind the talk so it's something we track and measure. We always ask if we have enough women and other diverse populations in the pipeline. When the pipeline isn't strong enough, we benchmark other companies to improve our talent pipeline.

Each of our business units is in the process of hiring a diversity officer to tweak their overall charter to the needs of each part of the organization. ●

Amplifying the Effectiveness of the CEO

An Interview with Jessica Sharman,
Co-Chief of Staff to the Chief Executive Officer, SAP



Jessica Sharman

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to her current role, Jessica Sharman led SAP's post-merger integration team. Earlier in her SAP career, she ran various strategic projects for SAP's Corporate Strategy Group, including the renewal of the SAP Portfolio Process in 2011. Sharman joined SAP in 2005 and started her career in a field role, working directly with customers and SAP account teams in the Value Engineering team. Before she joined SAP, she worked for Peoplesoft in sales value management and for McKinsey and Baan Company in consulting roles. Sharman holds an undergraduate degree from Brown University, and an M.B.A. from Wharton.

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How do you define your role at SAP?

I think of Vanessa (Bill's other Co-Chief of Staff) and myself as multipliers for Bill, as people trying to make him as effective as he can be. It's essential to make sure logistics are running smoothly and that he's briefed as he goes into meetings with customers or internal meetings, so he has the latest and greatest information.

Vanessa is based in the U.S. and I am based in Germany. We work in different time zones and provide coverage almost around the clock to make Bill more effective.

How hard is it to keep everybody happy and can it sometimes be frustrating when that isn't possible?

We do our best but it's a challenge. There are a lot of competing requests for his time. Bill has an amazing amount of energy and capability to process things, so he accomplishes an incredible amount with the support infrastructure he has and manages to stay ahead of the curve. It's always a juggling act but we manage to balance the demands on his time reasonably well.

How important is it to be open and honest when there are good and bad things to tell Bill?

It is important and takes some time. Being open and frank with Bill is getting easier as we develop a deeper relationship with him. Also, Vanessa and I talk about things jointly, giving each other a broad perspective that comes from being surrounded by different sets of people on each continent.

This helps us to adequately decide when something is worth pointing out to Bill, even if it's something bad. Sometimes, one of us might have a feeling that the sky is falling and the other person may have a different perspective on the situation at hand.

How important is it that SAP's culture provides opportunities for women and values diversity?

As a mother of two children, I don't think I could do my job if SAP did not offer flexible working hours.

Vanessa is also a mother of young children and I know she echoes my view. SAP gives its employees a lot of freedom in terms of working schedules, which is really critical and game-changing. ●