

Delivering on the Promise of as-a-Service

An Interview with Debra (Debbie) A. Polishook,
Group Chief Executive-Accenture Operations, Accenture



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EDITORS' NOTE *Debbie Polishook assumed her current post in September of 2016. Prior to this, she was Group Operating Officer for Accenture Operations.*

COMPANY BRIEF *Accenture (accenture.com) is a leading global professional services company providing a broad range of services and solutions in strategy, consulting, digital, technology, and operations. Combining unmatched experience and specialized skills across more than 40 industries and all business functions – underpinned by the world's largest delivery network – Accenture works at the intersection of business and technology to help clients improve their performance and create sustainable value for their stakeholders. With approximately 384,000 people serving clients in more than 120 countries, Accenture drives innovation to improve the way the world works and lives.*

How do you define your role within Accenture?

As the group chief executive of Accenture Operations, I'm responsible for what is approximately a \$7-billion business with over 100,000 professionals globally. Our Accenture Operations portfolio comprises business process services and infrastructure services, which are primarily focused on cloud, and are focused on driving a new type of value for our clients.

What we're focused on is delivering on the promise of as-a-Service. I talk about the promise because it's about being able to deliver impactful business outcomes that provide speed to value, that are flexible, that deliver consistently with very high quality, and that are paid for based on value or on a consumption basis.

In the past, business process and infrastructure services were very transactional in nature. Today, transactions still need to be processed, of course, but where the value sits is in the data that is created from the process.

We can look at this data with our deep functional and industry expertise and see patterns, applying advanced analytics so we can make recommendations to our clients on how to drive new value and impact their business in positive ways.

The as-a-Service business model also provides flexibility. Clients today are doing acquisitions and divestitures, launching new products, and going into new markets, so they need the flexibility in their operations to accommodate those changes.

The final factor is speed. When our clients come to us, they want to do things as quickly as possible, so we're able to mobilize efficiently – starting small and scaling fast.

Once we are operating our clients' business processes or infrastructure, we apply automation and artificial intelligence to drive increased productivity and efficiency. By using technology to remove the most transactional work we are enabling our people to learn new things and focus on more strategic activities – and see career progression.

All of this is fueled by cloud, which provides economical and flexible access to computing power.

When you're leading a part of the business that is so large in size and scale, how do you maintain an innovative culture?

That is our secret sauce. Innovation for us is the lifeblood of the business, and one of our key differentiators in Accenture Operations is our ability to continually enhance, disrupt, and reinvent what we do to stay ahead of the market and to stay current for our clients.

We have an innovation architecture at Accenture that spans everything from our research capabilities to our technology and innovation labs around the world where we're looking at the latest and greatest in new technologies. We're piloting and experimenting with those technologies and Accenture Operations intersects with that. We share ideas about what we believe could be powered by emerging technologies and, together, we look at the art of the possible, piloting and testing new solutions.

We have a network of business advisers embedded throughout our delivery centers who are experienced practitioners in a particular business function or industry who are focused on identifying opportunities to drive additional value for our clients. When we're ready to scale something because we see that it can work, we push it through our network of professionals.

Three years ago, for example, we started to pilot and then rapidly scale robotic process automation. Today, we're focusing on artificial intelligence, using it to transform complex processes – those that are highly judgment based, or performed by experts with functional and industry experience using unstructured data inputs such as digital images or text – and we expect to start scaling that like crazy in the near future.

Tell me about Accenture's focus on diversity and inclusion?

At Accenture, inclusion and diversity are fundamental to our culture and embedded in our core values. Our employees represent a tremendous variety of cultures, ethnicities, beliefs, backgrounds, and languages. This rich diversity makes our company stronger, smarter, and more innovative, which helps us better serve the needs of our clients and our communities.

I firmly believe our global Accenture Operations team of more than 100,000 professionals are the ultimate differentiator for us in the marketplace. We hire, train, and develop the best people in the industry and want them to continually be growing and extending their skills so that they build a long-term career with us.

If you visit one of our delivery centers, you'd see this diversity in action. For instance, in terms of skills, we have doctors, nurses, accountants, engineers, and marketers to name a few – doing high-end work for our clients. That's why we're the employer of choice in many of our key delivery locations.

You joined Accenture in 1985. What has made Accenture a place where you have wanted to spend your career?

If you would have told me 30 years ago that I would spend my entire career here I never would have believed it. But the tremendous opportunities I've had to travel around the world, working in different parts our business – from management consulting to operations, delivery, client account leadership, and across a number of industry groups – have kept me challenged and engaged, providing me with the foundation for my current role.

Even more than all that, it's been the people above everything that have made this a place I want to be both professionally as well as personally. I've had fantastic teams working with and for me who continue to inspire me – and I have had great mentors inside and outside the firm, both male and female. I'm proud of our business and the phenomenal colleagues I work with every day. ●