

# A Business Imperative

An Interview with Renee Zaugg,  
Vice President of Enterprise IT Infrastructure & Development, Aetna, Inc.



Renee Zaugg

**EDITORS' NOTE** Renee Zaugg has held her current post since August 2012. Prior to this, she held roles as Chief of Staff for the Chief Information Officer (CIO) and Head of Operations Management; Technical Infrastructure Support Head; and Operations Manager.

**COMPANY BRIEF** Aetna ([aetna.com](http://aetna.com)) is one of the nation's leading diversified healthcare benefits companies, serving an estimated 46.7 million people with information and resources to help them make better-informed decisions about their healthcare. Aetna offers a broad range of traditional, voluntary, and consumer-directed health insurance products and related services, including medical, pharmacy, dental,

behavioral health, group life and disability plans, medical management capabilities, Medicaid healthcare management services, workers' compensation administrative services, and health information technology products and services. Aetna's customers include employer groups, individuals, college students, part-time and hourly workers, health plans, healthcare providers, governmental units, government-sponsored plans, labor groups, and expatriates.

## How do you define your role at Aetna and your areas of focus?

My scope includes infrastructure for the enterprise and application development for core systems and international IT.

### All of that links together?

Yes, it does. It's very clear from a technology perspective that the infrastructure and development through our DevOps initiatives are connected and by organizing the way we did, it brings together the synergies to deliver more features and functionality to the business at a lower price point.

### Is there innovation taking place in this part of the business?

Every day. We are continually stressing the importance of automation, big-data analytics, machine learning, and positioning for the Internet of Things and what that means to deliver more seamless capabilities to our members and to our constituents.

### Is this an area where you feel Aetna can differentiate?

We have a lot of talent in the company. We work very closely with many of our technology partners and start-ups, and we absolutely can differentiate ourselves with our products.

### With such a diverse customer, how important is it to mirror that in the workforce?

I started the Women's Leadership Alliance at Aetna four years ago, and the research is very clear that a company that has both gender and ethnic diversity performs better, especially if this is represented at the top.

Clearly, it's a business imperative. One of the things that the Women's Leadership Alliance sponsored was a research study called The Power of the Purse in Healthcare, and it became evident in this research that women are making the choices for healthcare not only for themselves but for their families, which includes extended families. In many cases, they are the chief medical officer of the household and could use innovation and tools that make healthcare simpler and gives them peace of mind while caring for others. This is a huge opportunity to get a women's perspective not only in some of the decisions around our markets but also in products and services.

### How important is it that men are participants in this kind of discussion?

We're a service company so we have a very large workforce of which more than 75 percent women, but as people move up, leadership changes. It flips when it goes into the executive tier, which is the top 250 employees in our company. I wanted to dig deeper into that and provide programs around that area. It's that executive director or professional level, and jumping into the vice president level.

We created a board of advisers with very powerful women in the company to look at what we could do purposefully and programmatically to help with this issue, such as specific programs around developing women and creating a cohort of the high-potential and high-performing director-level women.

Our first conference was for women but that changed when we started looking at research and how important it is to have men as sponsors. When we're not in the room, they're making decisions about us.

We created Aetna Advocating Real Change, which is a program focused on men and women learning together about the differences in sponsorships and men helping to promote women.

Our next conference after that was inclusive of the men at the executive tier because they're there and we need to talk about the tough things.

Since we started that, we've moved the needle 10 points in the right direction of representation at that level, so we have made tremendous progress.

### For real change, doesn't there need to be buy-in from the top? How important is it that the C-suite drives that progress?

We have great female representation on our board of directors and have added another woman recently.

It's important that the executive committee is where this change is happening. Those are the boots on the ground that are working with the organization in setting direction. We purposely build in access to the C-suite leaders and our executive committee leaders.

Recently, our chairman spent over an hour talking to the women in our Strategies for Success program about where he sees the company going and how our group can make a real difference, and that level of engagement means so much. The women in that room can't stop talking about how important it was that they felt they were getting the attention from not only the chairman but also from the executive committee.

### How critical is it to have mentors for young women coming into business today?

It's very important. There is a huge difference between mentoring and sponsoring.

Mentors are very essential, especially early in a career. However, when people are later in their careers and ready to jump into a higher level with large organizational responsibility and enterprise focus, they need someone who can really advocate for them and take a risk on them. Typically, a mentor won't do that. It's usually someone who has direct access to that person and is willing to take a risk on them.

I believe mentoring is important but top-level sponsorship is very important for someone who has done great work and has demonstrated their capability. That sponsor needs to be willing to put themselves out there for that person in making the recommendation for their advancement.

### What makes Aetna a place you have so much passion for?

In all the years I've been here, what makes Aetna special is that we've always been clear in our direction and vision. When we find the compass is changing, we've always course-corrected and moved on, and we always kept our members in the center of everything we do. That resonates with all of us. We're helping to build a healthier world. ●