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By Patricia Houlihan. Photos by Matthew Gilson.
The Path to the Top

Like a lot of MBA students, John Edwardson had his eye on the corner office from the start. Now the CEO of CDW Corporation, he has spent years at the top of such firms as United Airlines. “I happened to be at the right place at the right time more than once,” he said. “But I’ve been taken over twice and I’ve been fired once. I’ve had a number of new jobs, just because I had to get a new job. So you never know why you get the opportunities you get.”

In 2001, Edwardson took the helm at CDW, replacing founding entrepreneur Michael Krasny. His first day on the job, Edwardson demonstrated his loyalty to 100 CDW managers by taking a sledgehammer to his laptop computer made by Dell, its biggest competitor. In 2002, he promised employees he would shave his head if they made third-quarter sales goals. “Despite the decline in the technology department,” the Chicago Sun-Times reported, “sales goals were met. And at a company event, Edwardson’s head was shaved.”

Five years after Edwardson was hired as CEO and chairman of the board, revenue increased from $3.8 billion to $6.3 billion, the kind of success that has earned him the 2006 Distinguished Corporate Alumni Award. “We’ve had reasonably good growth in a difficult industry,” he said. “The objective is to get to $10 billion in revenue by the end of 2008, to grow significantly more.”

Continued on page 25
Five Minutes with John Edwardson, ’72

What has been your greatest accomplishment? Raising three very self-sufficient, independent, and accomplished daughters at age 27, 29, and 31. What’s been your most humbling experience? I’ve had a lot of those! It may have been when the unions vetoed my election to CEO at United Airlines. It was on the front page of the Chicago Tribune’s business section and the front page of the Wall Street Journal. It was the most visible humbling experience in terms of working hard to achieve something, being very close to it, and not getting it.

On a completely different side but equally humbling, for ten and a half years, I worked with two families, picking up kids from the inner city whose mothers were in prison for murder. I drove them to visit their mothers at the state penitentiary in Dixon, Illinois. And I naively felt that through spending time with them, I could have a major impact on their lives and keep them from getting into the difficulties their parents had gotten into. But their world was so different that we’re in. CDW is a young, vibrant company—there’s so much energy it’s unbelievable. There’s a very positive attitude about what we can get done and make happen.

What’s the best part of your job? I get up every morning looking forward to work because I love the company, the coworkers, and the business that we’re in. CDW is a young, vibrant company—there’s so much energy it’s unbelievable. There’s a very positive attitude about what we can get done and make happen. If you had to choose another line of work, what would it be? I would be an impressionist painter who could get done and make happen.

What do you wish you had known at the start of your career? Humility! That was an easy one.

What is the hardest part of your job? It was the most visible humbling experience in terms of working hard to achieve something, being very close to it, and not getting it.

What has been your greatest accomplishment? My greatest accomplishment is my family. My daughters are now 27, 29, and 31. They are independent, and accomplished. What’s been your most humbling experience? I’ve been very lucky that I’ve had people who looked for what I did right instead of what I did wrong. —John Edwardson

“It was, in effect, the CFO job, but that title wasn’t used in 1977,” he said. Edwardson’s next position was with another bank customer, Northwest Airlines, which he joined as CFO in 1984 when he was 34 years old. Edwardson was undaunted at the time, but now the recollection makes him shake his head. “I was such a cocksure person, I wasn’t the least bit scared. I knew that I knew better ways to do things. I thought when I was 28 I should have been the CEO of the company,” he said. “A few years ago, I called some of the guys I worked for who were then in their 60s and 70s, and I told them, ‘Thank you for putting up with me.’ I talked to one in St. Paul, and he said, ‘You know, you were a little self-confident and a little arrogant, but you were really good at what you did, so it was worth putting up with those other things. And you’ve learned a lot over the years, and you’re not nearly as hard to get along with as you were when you were 28.’

“I’ve been very lucky that I’ve had people who looked for what I did right instead of what I did wrong. I’ve tried to remember that over the years,” Edwardson said.

The ride was sometimes bumpy. As CFO for United Airlines Employee Acquisition Corporation, he guided the employees’ efforts to buy the airline; an agreement was reached but employees failed to raise funds, and the bid failed. Edwardson’s next job was executive vice president and CFO at Ameritech; after nearly four years, he was tapped a second time by United employees to help them purchase the company, this time successfully.

After four years at United as president and chief operating officer, he was named CEO by the board of directors, but that appointment was vetoed by the airline’s labor unions. “I wouldn’t give them the contract they wanted because I felt I would bankrupt the company,” he said.

Edwardson then joined Burns International Services, a company that provides security guards for hire. “It was a troubled company, and I was hired by the board of directors and Merrill Lynch Equity Partners, which owned 44 percent, to fix the company and sell it as soon as possible. We were able to do that in 17 months. My job was to eliminate my job.”

Looking for his next position, he discovered that CDW founder and CEO Michael Krasny was ready to turn over the reins. At first, Krasny said he planned to stay active in the company’s management. When he changed his mind, Edwards said agreed to take on the top job. “We were able to work out something that has worked well for both of us,” he said.

Throughout his career, Edwardson has seen himself as a coach. “I look at the job as more of a teaching job and less of a decision-making job,” he said. “The more senior position I’ve been in, the fewer decisions I make. As a leader, you have some decisions that only you can make. But you’re much better off if you can get the people who report to you to make decisions. They feel better about what they’re doing, and they work harder to make sure their decision is the right one.”
Creating Opportunity in India

By Patricia Houlihan

In 1998, he founded the software company Mphasis. He added a call center the next year, and merged with an Indian firm in 2000. The new firm, Mphasis BFL, became the sixth largest software company in India in seven years. This summer, he sold 52 percent of the firm to Electronic Data Systems (EDS) for $380 million; the IT outsourcing giant had been seeking a way to boost its offshore presence in India for two years. “It’s timing—seeing the confluence of various trends coming together and being able to ride that wave,” Rao said. “Why didn’t other people see the crest and ride it? That’s where I took some risks.” That approach has earned Rao, ’81, the 2006 Distinguished Entrepreneurial Alumni Award.

After earning a bachelor’s degree and an MBA in India, he entered the PhD program at the GSB. He worked toward the doctorate for two years but stopped before writing his dissertation. Instead, he decided to head back to the business world. He spent the next 17 years at Citicorp, a move that took him from New York to South America.

It’s true, Jaithirth (Jerry) Rao has had good timing. He also was well prepared when the moment came to launch his own company. Raised in India and educated in the United States, Rao had spent nearly 20 years working in information technology when his corporate career hit a plateau. In the late 1990s, surrounded by entrepreneurs starting their own firms, Rao decided to start his own.

2006 Distinguished Entrepreneurial Alumni Award

Jaithirth (Jerry) Rao, ’81

Continued on page 29
Five Minutes with Jerry Rao, ’81

What do you consider your greatest accomplishment?

To be able to attract a lot of very talented people to work with me in a startup that nobody had heard of, purely based on my reputation for trust. I never used a headhunter; all the people came through word-of-mouth references. The reputation that I was a person who could be trusted, who would treat them fairly, helped.

What has been your most humbling experience?

After the company went public, we had one quarter when our financial results did not meet guidance. I had to explain to equity analysts why we were off our numbers, and this was not easy. Finally, I remember saying that there is only so much postmortem one can do. We had to take it on the chin and move on.

What do you wish you had known at the start of your career?

Writing notes to yourself about what you hope to accomplish this week, and this month, and this quarter, and periodically checking against that is a very useful process. Otherwise, other people dictate your agenda. You still do a lot of things that are useful, but your priority items get neglected, and you can lose focus and the discipline to do your own tasks.

What’s the hardest part of your job?

It’s awfully lonely because there are certain issues you can’t even talk about—senior people you have to let go, or bets you’ve made where you’ll know the results in three months. You really can’t seek counsel because you’ll just get platitudes. You have to live with the problem. That loneliness is quite a hard situation. But there is no cure for it; you have to be stoic and put up with it.

What’s the best part of your job?

To be able to walk the corridors and see young people working hard, being happy, making something of their lives. Many of them are making three or four times more than what their parents made, and they’re moving up and getting social mobility. Seeing that whole phenomenon and knowing that, some way, I’ve contributed to making that happen.

If you had to choose another line of work, what would it be?

An architect. Architecture is a little bit like business. It’s not just about a building, it’s about how people live, how they work. It’s about sociology and economics. It has to be affordable, it has to be at the right price. Business is like that—economics, you have to create the value; sociology, people have to work together. And of course you have to deliver your product and service to your customers.

“...we’ve created something that can give fulfillment on so many counts—shareholders, customers, employees.” —Jerry Rao

What saved Mphasis were the call centers Rao added to the firm in 1999 as a favor to a friend. “When the IT industry slowed down, that call center started growing gangbusters, 100 percent quarter on quarter.” Today, Rao said, it’s become a BPO (business process outsourcing) service provider that handles such tasks as tax returns and equity research. “It became our engine of growth. Today we’re a combined company with a top line of about $200 million—$60 million from the BPO side and $140 million from the IT side,” he said. “We have a total of 12,000 employees. There were two of us in 1998.” Such growth has allowed Rao to take an active role in India’s historic economic boom. “More than half the employees are women, and these are women who have suddenly become the highest wage earner within their family,” he said. Stating in 2004, Rao pushed Mphasis through a series of strategic acquisitions to broaden its product offerings. In addition to its headquarters in Bangalore (one of 10 offices in India), the company also has offices in Japan, China, Singapore, Australia, Europe, North America, and Central America.

When executives at EDX decided to ramp up the firm’s offshore presence in India, they set their sights on Mphasis. “The deal was settled in June. ‘It makes us feel very good that in eight years, we’ve created something that can give fulfillment on so many counts—shareholders, customers, employees,’” Rao said. He agreed to stay on and oversee the transition. “I can’t simply sell it and walk away. There’s a moral connection to 12,000 people whether you like it or not.”

Rao said it was partly luck that enabled him to be part of India’s resurgence. “Twenty years ago, India had a 3 or 4 percent growth rate; today, it’s 8 or 10 percent. Twenty years ago, there was no Indian IT industry; today, it’s considered a major player in the world. If I were 74 instead of 54, I would not have been able to participate.”

He also attributes his success to the way his corporate career came to a close. “If they had promoted me, I would have stayed,” he said. “They didn’t. They did me a favor.”

“Sometimes out of dark clouds, a light emerges.”
Pushing Boundaries in Marketing

By Patricia Houlihan

Julie Roehm, '95
2006 Distinguished Young Alumni Award

Four months after Julie Roehm was named senior vice president of marketing communications at Wal-Mart Stores, the company’s annual shareholders meeting made the New York Times. Headlined “A Touch of Broadway Near Bentonville,” the article described how professional actors portraying Wal-Mart employees sang and danced through a 90-minute show.

The production “underscored the growing influence of the new marketing team at Wal-Mart, which put it together,” the paper said. “I always knew this was a bit of a risk,” Roehm told the Times after the meeting. A willingness to take chances at Chrysler and Ford, where she began her marketing career, is what has earned Roehm, ‘95, the 2006 Distinguished Young Alumni Award. “There’s always some level of understanding when to take a calculated risk, whether that’s in choosing your school, a job, an assignment, or making a bold statement,” she said. “The things we don’t do are the things we end up regretting.”

In the decade since she earned her MBA, Roehm has made the most of every opportunity, often grabbing the media’s attention with groundbreaking marketing campaigns. An Advertising Age story called her “colorful from the start of her career.”

Continued on page 33
Feature Distinguished Alumni Awards

Five Minutes with Julie Roehm, ’95

What do you consider your greatest accomplishment?
My sons, Nicholas and Luke. I want my kids to be proud of me as well; that’s important.

I take pride in the Focus launch and pulling off the extraordinary. Also, going from Ford to Chrysler was like being Benedict Arnold. Building an effective team meant supervising people who had 10 to 20 years more experience. I made it work by saying, “I’m in this position to provide leadership and cover; I’m not here to tell you how to do your job.”

What has been your most humbling experience?
The birth of my first son. At 30 weeks, I noticed he had not kicked in more than 24 hours. At the hospital, we found out the baby was anemic. Blood sampling, a procedure that had formed a percutaneous umbilical determination how low his red blood cells were. They rushed me into the OR and performed a percutaneous umbilical blood sampling, a procedure that had been performed once at that hospital. They inserted a large needle where the placenta met the umbilical cord, drew blood from the baby, typed it, and transfused blood to him. The moment blood started flowing to him, he kicked! Nick was born seven weeks early at 4 lbs., 14 oz.

What do you wish you had known at the start of your career?
That corporate politics were going to play a big role—that having the best intentions and doing really great work sometimes just isn’t enough.

What’s the hardest part of your job, maybe something people don’t know?
Trying to connect with each person on a human level every day. It’s important as you try to build a team, particularly as a newcomer. You want to be part of the overall culture of the company, but also have a culture within your own team, which requires people to know each other on a more personal level.

What’s the best part of your job?
Learning to use the store itself as a marketing device, and about the dynamics of the store environment. When you’re talking about the largest retailer in the world, the breadth and depth we have is overwhelming. It’s like being a kid in a candy store.

If you had to choose another line of work, what would it be?
Public relations. It’s using persuasion to get the notion across to really savvy journalists, and trying to create a new channel to connect with people in a way that you don’t have full control of. That’s a really powerful place.

If it’s done well and objectively, it has far more impact than any ad we run.

Randy Curtis, a former Wal-Mart vice president, told the magazine, “She’s a firebrand—smart, energetic, and articulate.”

Of her career so far, Roehm concedes, “It’s been the ride of a lifetime.”

An undergraduate engineering student at Purdue University, she was accepted to the co-op program, which involved working alternate semesters. Roehm’s first assignment was at Bristol Meyers Squibb. A member of the package engineering team, she spent a lot of time with the marketing and sales departments and discovered her niche on the business side. “I was fascinated by the marketing studies and the insights about why the labels weren’t appealing,” she said.

Upon graduation, Roehm headed straight to the GSB. Younger than her peers and looking for real-world experience, she enrolled in the New Products Lab, where the team worked on a solution for American Airlines. That summer, she interned at the airline. As graduation approached, she interviewed with 70 companies, garnering job offers from five of them. Roehm accepted a position with Ford Motor Company and joined its marketing leadership program. “It was important that the company have longevity, but as a marketer I wanted a firm with a lot of flexibility,” she said. “When it came to marketing, I felt there was a lot left to do in the field.”

In 1999, she was named brand manager and charged with introducing the Ford Focus, a car meant to replace the popular Escort. “We did crazy, out-of-the-box things that were intended to connect with a younger audience—live TV commercials, personalization packages like a ‘road trip package,’ and little gems that fit in the O in the word ‘Focus’ on the back of the car,” she said. “We sent Baby-G Shock watches with the word ‘Focus’ on them to your home when you ordered the car.”

The strategy was enormously successful. “We received a great deal of recognition,” Roehm said. “It was fun and it was uncharted territory. Better than that, the results were tangible. We set specific goals in terms of sales and demographics, and we achieved every one of them,” she said.

Roehm parlayed the success into a bigger job at Chrysler, where she gave the green light to such successful Dodge campaigns as “Grab life by the horns!” and “That thang got a Hemi?” She successfully forged a partnership between Dodge and the rock band Aerosmith to inject youthful rebellion into the brand. Unafraid to push boundaries, Roehm even arranged for Dodge to sponsor the “lingerie bowl” during the 2004 Super Bowl; the event featured models playing football in their underwear, although Dodge withdrew sponsorship amid consumer and dealer complaints. And under her direction, Dodge debuted a marketing campaign for the Durango truck that included a television commercial showing two men at a urinal having a double-entendre-filled conversation about size.

“I was always on the more innovative side of marketing, trying to push the boundaries and explore new opportunities,” she said. But keeping an eye on the bottom line may have made the difference for Roehm. “Fortunately, my interest in analytics and the quantifiable part of the business is a real strength,” she said. “I don’t think there’s ever been a time in our history when marketers are held so accountable to the bottom line.”

After her success with Dodge, Roehm was promoted to overseeing marketing for all three brands at Chrysler, which included managing campaigns, special events, Web development, merchandising, even the customer database. “It was a huge job that was extremely challenging, but also exciting,” she said.

Still, when a recruiter called and asked if she would consider moving to Arkansas to take a newly created job with the world’s largest retailer, Roehm was intrigued. After achieving so much in the automotive industry over 11 years, she was ready to learn an entirely new business, and Wal-Mart provided the chance, she said. “I’m learning about the store as a medium, a channel of information, not just as a place to buy stuff.”

The family is building a house in Arkansas, an indication of Roehm’s plans to stick with Wal-Mart even though the retail environment is much different than that of big auto. Former Chrysler marketing chief Bud Liebler told Advertising Age the match between Roehm and Wal-Mart could be a perfect fit, and early signs indicate he may be right. Roehm told the New York Times that president and CEO H. Lee Scott Jr. had asked for “something different” for the employee portion of the meeting; afterward, Wal-Mart executives gave her positive feedback. “And at Wal-Mart,” she said, “they would definitely come and tell you if they hated it.”

“I don’t think there’s ever been a time in our history when marketers are held so accountable to the bottom line.” —Julie Roehm
Watching the Vietnam War escalate, Vitale weighed his options. "I thought I'd end up being drafted," he said. A recruiter from the bank told him about the First Scholar program. Designed to attract college graduates who hadn't considered a career in banking, it provided a position at First Chicago and covered tuition at Chicago GSB. A history major, he took the job and enrolled in the Evening MBA Program. "It was a way to get additional education paid for, and it was an adventure because I'd never left New England before," said Vitale, '76. "I never thought I'd be here more than three or four years."

Nearly four decades later, his career in Chicago has taken him from banking to advising the Chicago Public Schools for $1 a year, a move that has earned Vitale the 2006 Distinguished Public Service/Public Sector Alumni Award. "I come from a modest, blue-collar background and was the first in my family to go to college," he said. "Public education clearly made the difference in my life."
**Five Minutes with David Vitale, ’76**

What do you consider your greatest accomplishment? I like to think we’ve shifted the culture at Chicago Public Schools to one where high expectations are actually OK and continuous improvement is something we can aspire to without negativity. A big challenge was to convince people that every child can learn. I like to think I had something to do with us setting that standard.

What’s been your most humbling experience? Going into some high schools in difficult neighborhoods and thinking about what the principal has to deal with every day. They have to deal with parental and community organizations, kids with all kinds of challenges, faculty, and more.

What do you wish you had known at the start of your career? How critical relationships are to success. It’s not just about being smart or intellectually insightful. Business and organizations are about people and their relationships. Had I known that earlier, I would have done a better job of developing those skills, which didn’t come naturally to me.

What is the hardest part of your job, maybe something people don’t know? Having the patience to deal with ambiguity and the change process in the public sector. Often it’s obvious what you need to do, but you have to have patience. You’ll get there eventually, but if you move too fast, you’ll blow the whole opportunity. Holding yourself in is sometimes very hard.

What’s the best part of your job? You meet some extraordinary people. There are 47,000 employees, and while not all of them are great, there are thousands of them who are absolutely committed to helping kids grow. They’re not going to get rich, so you know they’re doing it because of their commitment.

If you had to choose another line of work, what would it be? That’s hard. I like what I do. I’ve learned to like working with people and helping them harness their energies toward a common objective. I could do that almost anywhere if it was for a good goal.

Vitale had not expected to begin his professional career as a banker, but he was struck by a remark made by an executive at First Chicago. “Gaylord Freeman, chairman, told me, ‘Your customers expect you to be their advisor, and to know not just about the economy and money, but also what’s going on in the world. There’s nothing that’s not on your plate, from their perspective.’ That turned out to be true. I never was a traditional banker, so it was a fascinating career.”

Joining senior management at First Chicago also meant taking an active role in philanthropic organizations, so Vitale joined boards at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Science and Industry, and Glenwood School for Boys and Girls in the south suburbs, among others. “I was following in the footsteps of my boss and the others before him,” he said. “I had an interest, but I was shaped by the involvement I was involved with.”

Vitale made time for nonprofits even as he led the bank through two successful mergers, first with NB&I and later with Banc One. “It was a very intense experience,” he said of the mergers. “The second one was enough.” He was vice chairman at the new company, Banc One, when he left in 1999 and never returned to banking. Vitale spent a year as an adjunct faculty member at Chicago GSB. He also remained active on various boards of directors including the Chicago Board Options Exchange, where managers were struggling with the Chicago Board of Trade, which had launched it. In trying to help the two sides settle their disagreements, Vitale found himself offered the position of CEO at the Board of Trade. “I wasn’t seeking it,” he said. “I agreed to do it only because it was an interesting challenge.” He modernized the management, reined in expenditures, ended the Board of Trade’s relationship with the German exchange, and smoothed out the rift with the Options Exchange. After 18 months, his tenure ended.

The path toward nonprofits that Vitale began in college came full circle when he was tapped by newly appointed Chicago Public Schools (CPS) chief Arne Duncan to guide a restructuring effort. Vitale made an organizational assessment of CPS, and when Duncan approved of the plan, Vitale agreed to implement it at a salary of one dollar per year. “The reason I could add value was that I’d learned some skills at the bank during the merger and in making improvements at the Board of Trade,” he said. “Organizations that haven’t had a lot of discipline or management have a lot of the same problems.”

According to the Chicago Tribune, “his role grew in influence and scope as he became one of the top two managers under Duncan overseeing seven departments.” Vitale said he and Duncan determined the 600 schools were like franchises performing at various levels of success. “We started differentiating our management process,” Vitale said. The result included autonomously managed performance schools—about 85 schools that have greater operational freedom because of their success—and Renaissance 2010, a program announced in 2004 that calls for closing about 30 troubled schools and replacing them with nearly 100 new smaller ones. A nonprofit called Renaissance Schools Fund is raising private money for the new schools, and Vitale’s role in the school system is highly valued by the business community. Don Lubin, who chairs the fund, told the Tribune, “He brought a certain discipline to the school system. He had an independence and he used it wisely to get things done.”

Under Vitale’s direction, CPS has maintained budgetary discipline by eliminating administrative overhead in order to close budget gaps. “We closed $200–$300 million budget gaps per year in the last two years,” he said.

Vitale will leave CPS before the calendar year is up, four years after taking the post. He is unsure where his path will go next, but was glad to serve the Chicago Public Schools. “When do you get to apply what you’ve learned in one world to another world that you think is really important to others?” Vitale said. “Not often. I think it’s a pretty unique gift.”