



## Enjoying the challenge

31/01/2010 | Channel: [Technology, IT](#)

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Steve Hughes, CEO of Aspect Enterprise Solutions, tells Matt High why untapped potential is the most important part of any business

For many people the thought of taking on a small to mid-sized business with the target of growing that venture to become a leading player at the top of an industry, would be a daunting one. When that target involves expanding companies involved in the worlds of IT and energy, both sectors where development occurs at a frantic pace, then taking on a high pressured role with great expectations becomes even more of a difficult task to accept. For some however, joining a fledgling company that aspires to grow but needs the guidance of an experienced hand to achieve that, represents a challenge that is too appealing to pass on.

Steve Hughes, current CEO of innovative IT business Aspect Enterprise Solutions is one such person. In his 30 year career operating in a number of market sectors, including more recently oil and gas, Steve's CV can be characterised by joining aspiring businesses and having a hands on role in seeing them fulfil their true potential. His current role at Aspect, a software business that has more than a decade's experience in dealing with the world's largest energy corporations, has coincided with a period of sustained and record breaking success, including a 450 per cent increase in profits in 2009 from 2008.

I recently spoke with Steve to find out more about why taking on such a challenging prospect again and again throughout a career is an appealing idea, and to hear his thoughts on why success has followed him on his chosen path. "I often ask my friends the same question," was his first thought. "Throughout my career I have kept taking on businesses that are relatively small with the aim of working hard to make them wholesome and healthy organisations that can show steady expansion. And while I think that sometimes it is tough to repeat the same trick, the ultimate answer is that really it is a personal thing, I genuinely enjoy the challenge."

A look at Steve's career history, which spans some 30 years and a number of roles, illustrates that it is not a challenge that he has shied away from. From his first role at the UK's National Computing Centre, which lasted 11 years and is a period that he describes affectionately as 'his apprenticeship', he has worked for a number of fast-growing businesses, taking a hands on role in mapping out successful growth strategies for each.

"Since that first job you could say that my career has been characterised by joining typically small companies that are actively looking to grow and find an exit from their existing markets," he explains "Having worked for a number of businesses during the 1990s, including Legion Corporation and a business called Seer Technologies, where I worked in UK and International marketing, one of the first roles where I really experienced successful growth was as managing director of a customer relations management business called Point Information Systems. I was in this particular position for roughly four years and saw the business grow from your typical small company to a \$12 million dollar business."

It was after this particular success that Steve moved into the arena of software as a service businesses, a move that would ultimately see him land his current role of CEO of Aspect, and an arena in which he experienced further results. In fact, his expertise was already being noticed, with him being quickly hired to take on the role of international operations manager at YOUcentric, with the emphasis firmly on taking the business public.

"I was at YOUcentric for roughly a year and a half, and after much work there the company was eventually acquired by JD Edwards for \$96 million, which at that time was a considerable sum. In fact, JD Edwards asked me to stay on in order to advise them on how to attack the new markets that they intended to take the business into. Following this however, I joined a business called Carnegie Information Systems, again, with the job of shaping up and shipping out the business. This was my last role before I was tempted by the idea of joining Aspect, and taking what was essentially a very small, loss making company to the big time."

With such success behind him, and at a time when the industry was flourishing and was thus very competitive, I asked Steve what it was that drew him to Aspect, and the idea of starting again from scratch. "It was a simple decision," he relates, "and to this day I still tell the chairman that out of every business I have worked for this was without doubt the most challenging, but at the same time, it has always been the most enjoyable. What I found particularly appealing was the fact that on paper Aspect was a business that had made losses for six or seven years continuously as it invested in developing its product. In the midst of this my job was to come in and make that business profitable as soon as I could, which was an opportunity I relished as I could immediately see the potential, not only in Aspect as a business, but in a market that was ripe for consolidation."

Today the results of Steve's appointment speak for themselves. Since he came on board in 2005 Aspect has been a profitable business since 2007, now being on its 12th consecutive quarter of profit and closing a record year in 2009. As Steve explains, through innovation and a touch of expertise, Aspect now provides the oil and gas sector with one of the most comprehensive range of IT services available.

“Aspect is the only software as a services company that provides products and solutions that fit all sizes of company, and to that end we currently have customers in 88 countries around the world ranging from some of the world’s largest oil companies right down to a large number of small businesses, even in some cases one or two man trading companies.

“Oil and gas trading is an extremely difficult market, and to address this we provide two basic product lines,” he continues. “One, called Aspect DSC, provides real-time market information to traders that brings all of the relevant data together and consolidates it to allow the trader to make informed and intelligent decisions quickly and effectively. The other, Aspect ETRM, is a risk management software that allows businesses to keep track of their profits and manage risk, which in the energy market is of course vital. Historically we have focused purely on the oil and gas market, but now thanks to our growth we are looking to expand into new areas with these products.”

With success following him throughout his career one would assume that Steve has some hidden secret to management, or a number of winning techniques that never fail, but when asked about his thoughts on his management technique, he offers a refreshing response. “I have been on any number of management courses over the years that try and offer all sorts of management techniques and styles, one of the most common nowadays being that you are either a ‘sell’ type MD or a ‘tell’ type MD, but I really don’t believe in either of those. I like to think that far more simply I have built up my reputation over many years by acting almost in the role of a chief coach in a sporting team, which is what I consider my job to be.

“There are no real secrets to good management. Quite simply I see my job consisting of two things - one is thorough and very strong forward planning, and the other is taking on board all of the difficult challenges that are brought to me by my managers each day, finding where they need help and coaching them on how to decide which path to take.”

It is in this area that Steve’s experience really pays off. As with anyone who has worked their way up in business over a long and successful career, he understands the importance of effective man management: “One of the points I would make about my management style is that I am a firm believer in the fact that 99 per cent of people in any business have tremendous potential, and that a coach’s job is to draw out that potential in the best and most efficient way you can.

If I were to offer advice to anyone it would be that this is what I truly believe business to be about. Yes, it is very difficult to recruit, particularly in the current economic climate, but the sign of a great manager is someone who can bring out the best in what they have at their disposal. You do not always get to handpick everyone that is in you company, but before anything else, your job is to work hard at optimising what you have to make it more effective.”

Looking ahead, its is clear that 30 years of difficult, but ultimately satisfying roles have not dulled Steve’s passion for business, and the plans he has for taking Aspect further into the industry are bolstered by his confidence that IT, and in particular software as a service type solutions, will play an increasingly important role in the global oil and gas industry. In particular, he aims to pitch Aspect’s enviable product line to those oil and gas businesses in the mid-tier, companies that can grow and will benefit from the advantages software as a service offers.

And while the results that can be reaped from this kind of expansion are appealing enough, Steve remains focused on his most important assets: “In my view, all of those financial results are of course great, but the way that happens and watching people grow is far more satisfying. We currently have 106 employees at Aspect and over the coming years I want to see every one of them transform, that is the best part of any business.”

### **Aspect Enterprise Solutions**

Founded in 1999, Aspect Enterprise Solutions is a leading provider of web-based applications, customisation services and enterprise integration solutions for the global energy industry.

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