

## Brent Harrison

## HIGH-TECHNOLOGY MANAGEMENT

*MBA, Northwestern 1995  
BAH Economics, Queen's 1988*

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*In his own words: "The time I spend at work is valuable, the time I spend with my family is invaluable."*

**B**orn and raised in Vancouver, Brent Harrison never thought that he would one day be on the 'in' in Silicon Valley. But for someone who admits to heading off to university with no clear career path in mind, he has carved a remarkable leadership role for himself in the high technology industry

Upon his high school graduation, Brent looked eastwards to a number of universities in Ontario. "Both of my parents were originally from Ontario and my father was a Queen's graduate. However, I don't think that influenced my decision to come to Queen's too greatly. Sure, I heard stories growing up, but my parents were not into pressuring me toward a certain goal."

Arriving at Queen's in 1984, Brent enrolled in the economics program to gain a solid analytical foundation while broadening his liberal arts education by taking electives such as English, History and Politics. When not studying, he maintained a busy extra-curricular schedule, acting as Chair of Homecoming for the AMS and participating on various intramural sports teams. "The biggest thing, aside from education, was the sense of community I had at Queen's. It was so important to be making friendships and bonding with people who were in a similar situation in their life. Some of the most

important relationships of my life were fostered in this environment."

Upon graduation, Brent did not have a clear plan of what he was going to do in terms of a career. "I wanted to do something business related and also wanted to go back for an MBA, but I first needed 'real-world' experience." After brief stint in the insurance industry, he landed a job with Anixter in Toronto, a company recommended to him by a family friend.

At the time, Anixter was making a move toward telecommunications and computer networking, a field that quickly caught Brent's attention. "Although the job was quite technical and I did not have formal training, I had the enthusiasm and willingness to learn about the technology. To this day I believe my liberal arts degree helped me greatly, as so much of the new information from Silicon Valley had to be read and interpreted, which is what I had been trained to do at university."

Brent worked for Anixter for five years, learning much about technology, sales and marketing, ultimately becoming the youngest manager in the company's 40-year history. However, in 1993, he felt it was time to return to school and broaden his perspectives on business and leadership.

"I applied and was accepted into the Kellogg Graduate School of Management at Northwestern University in Chicago. I feel very privileged to have had an incredible MBA experience. I was at one of the top schools in the field, working with a world-

class faculty and peer group.” After two years in the program and an internship with Gemini Consulting, Brent signed on with the company full-time.

“Consulting really fascinated me — it involved working on a variety of projects with a broad array of companies. While initially focusing on sales and marketing, I gravitated to the Internet and electronic commerce, which was a great fit for my technical and strategic background.”

However, with the birth of his first child in 1997, the travelling — an integral part of the consulting world — began to wear on him. “I wanted to be home more with my wife and daughter, plus travelling too much really ages you prematurely!”

In 1998, after three months of searching, Brent signed on with Netscape Communications. “They were the darlings of the burgeoning Internet industry, the poster child, the first successful IPO and were still at the forefront of the Internet revolution. However, I joined them at a time when they had finally started to buckle under the intense attacks from Microsoft.” Brent was fortunate to have joined the strategic planning team, which was given the task of charting a new profitable course for the company.

“I felt like I was operating at ground zero of the Internet, and I was working for a great company going through a difficult time. While extraordinarily demanding, I loved it all — from the overall business strategy to directing new marketing approaches to identifying new market opportunities. I’ve also grown to really like living in Silicon Valley.”

After Netscape’s takeover by AOL, Brent joined AOL’s strategic development group. “I work across AOL’s various divisions to build new businesses. I was responsible for coming up with the strategy and then developing the right product, services and partnerships to build a new \$100M business in the automotive sector in about nine months.”

Brent recently moved to iPlanet ECommerce Solutions, the AOL division focused on business customers. There he founded and is leading a new business unit developing browsing, messaging, instant messaging and calendar desktop software.

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“While AOL, and now AOL Time Warner, is a very different company from Netscape, their leadership position in the industry is unmatched. Consequently, the impact of your work is truly affecting tens of millions of people. That’s profound.”

This Queen’s grad has found happiness in a career marked by lots of change and challenges, yet balanced by family and friends. And with two children now, he works harder than he ever thought was possible. At a time when his chosen line of work is defining our society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Brent Harrison is not primarily a businessperson, but rather a father.

“The biggest legacy we leave on this earth is our offspring. While the time I spend at work is valuable, the time I spend with my family is invaluable.” ❖

