CompTIA®

Spotlight on Success

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Amy Kardel

True Success Comes When You Help Others

In early March, Amy Kardel of IT consulting and services firm Clever Ducks was elected Chair of the CompTIA Board of Directors. With international and small business development experience, she brings a unique perspective and plans to build on those past successes in her new role.

How did she find herself in the position of leading a thriving MSP business and the IT industry association (she was elected to the board in 2013)? CompTIA sat down with Kardel to discuss the path, obstacles and achievements that got her there. Her story is this month's Spotlight on Success:

> "At the end of the day, you don't want to be remembered for the bits and bytes (the technology), but for the things you do to help others."

CompTIA: Amy, how did you get your start in the IT industry?

AK: I was born at the right time and finished college in the Bay area in the dot com era. My first business started in my dorm room at Berkley and involved a lot of software localization projects. Then I got into project management and started providing localization for larger companies, and was able to grow that into a business which I later sold. We translated software written for the US market into other languages. Sun Microsystems was a big client. My interest was always around how we could use technology to make peoples' lives better.

After my husband started a computer consulting company, around 25 years ago, I sold my business and joined him. That company we named Clever Ducks.

It was pretty difficult traveling internationally for the other job with young kids, so I made the leap and helped develop our MSP business. That included hiring, training, marketing, sales and running operations.

CompTIA: 25 years in business is a tremendous achievement in the IT industry. Congratulations! How have you and your team managed to succeed when so many small businesses fail?

AK: The key thing is that there's not just one thing. There's no silver bullet to success, but there are two big keys. One is to rely on peers and trusted industry standards. CompTIA is definitely a part of that part of our success. You have to use the available resources. Those from CompTIA, peer groups, vendors, distributors or your local small business development centers. You don't have to reinvent the wheel, but you can use what others have used to become successful.

The second piece of advice is to have a plan and execute that plan. We (Amy and her husband Peter) each have our own piece of the plan and we interface regularly on it. You have to have the mentality to develop strategies and budgets and goals on a regular basis. That process will trigger other good behaviors.

CompTIA: You've built a successful IT firm in a small community (San Luis Obispo, CA). What particular obstacles did that present and what have you done to overcome them?

AK: Well, I grew up here and moved back. It's a beautiful place to live. After coming back, I had to define who I am, even to those who knew me before. You get pigeonholed based on previous experiences in a small town. If you want to change from break fix or offer something new, people remember the old way. It can take a long time to rebrand yourself when you run a business in your hometown. Those who grew up small towns know.

But I think it's a plus too. One of the most important things to me is maintaining a high level of service. We always try to keep some extra capacity to do the extra things and keep everyone happy. It's more than a business relationship. The doctors' office we service is the same one I take my dad to for his monthly heart checkup. There are a number of reasons why I want a great reputation, but in a small town, it's essential if you want to be successful.

CompTIA: To what do you attribute your personal success?

AK: I believe you have to be aware of how you effect other people, and trying to be a positive impact is core to who I am. It's the little things we can influence. If you are giving people support, ideas, encouragement, resources, referrals and best practices, then you also know who to go to when you need a hand. At the end of the day, you don't want to be remembered for the bits and bytes (the technology), but for the things you do to help others.

CompTIA: The IT industry still has relatively few women in positions of such prominence (leading both a successful IT services firm and a major industry association). What roadblock, issues or misperceptions have you had to overcome as a woman in IT?

AK: Luckily, very few. I think being in the right place at the right time really helped. Being born a little later and in the state of California, I am really glad to be able to say gender hasn't been a major issue for me, but many women do experience those challenges. Through my participation in AWIT (the CompTIA Advancing Women in IT Community), I recognize the roadblocks many encounter in our industry.

The challenge I had to overcome was with balancing family and work. I'm sure men have that issue too, but it really is a struggle trying to do both well. That's been the hardest for me, having to balance the activities with aging parents and kids and work demands. It's a tough one and I still haven't gotten it figured out yet.

CompTIA: Any words of advice for those struggling with that work/life balancing…

AK: It truly is a bit of a myth. It should be work life "balancing." We're going to have good days and bad days. It's a process and you're never going to be totally balanced. We all need a strong team we can count on and we should always remember we're just a phone call away from a family emergency or major work issue.

Whatever excitement might come your way, you need to combine work and pleasure. Life is just too short. Sometimes you have to realize that certain things just have to be good enough while others need to be done perfectly. Knowing the difference is key. For the water polo team potluck, it's okay to be the mom who brings a bag of oranges. But there are times when

the kids need you to listen or an employee is having a major health struggle, or a client has a really difficult challenge to solve. Those are moments when you need 100% and half-baked solutions simply aren't good enough.

It's like juggling balls. Some may be rubber and some may be glass. You can drop the rubber ones and nothing will happen but drop a glass ball and you can't put it back together. I pray for wisdom to know the difference. That's the challenge in life.

CompTIA: In addition to CompTIA, you're also very active in your local community. How has that helped your business?

AK: In a small town, people like to do business with those they know and trust. It's important to be involved in civic activities because it's what makes our community a more vibrant place to live and it's also an opportunity to network for business. Whether it's the Chamber of Commerce or Rotary, I've found working side by side with other people is an opportunity to get to know them, and for them to know more about me and Clever Ducks.

Involvement in community organizations is also a way to get more leadership experience outside your own small company. Participating on boards and committees of civic organizations is educational and a good training ground. My work on these smaller community boards really helped me prepare for tacking on similar roles at CompTIA. The rules of organization really don't change regardless of the size of the association. I've been on boards that faced similar issues, just on a different scale.

CompTIA: When did you first get involved with CompTIA and what activities have you been involved in?

AK: My first involvement was through the certification side, which has been instrumental in the development of our techs. I later started attending Breakaway (the precursor to ChannelCon) to get another perspective on our industry to help us grow our business. That's when I discovered the CompTIA Managed Services Community, a peer group that offered a way to get more ideas to meet our specific needs.

Before those events, I never realized all the things CompTIA does besides offering industry certifications. The research materials are so helpful when you're trying to understand the industry. The public policy activities are extremely important, peaking my interest to attend the DC Fly-In where I got the opportunity to network with people with similar issues.

I also joined the AWIT community. It was not only a natural fit and a great place to network, but on a personal level, it allowed me to get to know other women in technology. Often times I travel by myself on business trips, so it's nice to meet other women to share industry ideas and best practices, and to get to meet other role models.

I've served on the board of CompTIA for three years now and I really enjoy helping define our role internationally, particularly with our EMEA activities. Those meetings are held annually in the fall in London and that involvement really brings my international experience full circle.

CompTIA: What makes the association unique?

AK: I believe it's the synergy between the pieces of our organization. The public policy and advocacy side of CompTIA complements the certification business. The revenue from the certifications goes into education, philanthropy and public policy. It's a very strong bundle that's really unique. No other organization in our industry has that synergy with true vendor-neutrality. That is the real key.

CompTIA: What advice do you have for those looking to advance in the IT industry?

AK: When you go to an industry event, be sure to ask questions and connect with others. Those conversations will really speed up your education. There's a lot of information available in the world, but there's not as much knowledge. While you can get a lot of answers through search engines today, when you want to apply that information to specific situations, don't be afraid to ask others for advice and help.