

Never the nerd

Annabel Cornish and Belinda Kent are rather like the Trinny and Suzannah of the Information Technology world – women who see the solutions quickly and cut through the jargon to make things work

The IT department of many companies is inhabited by ‘anoraks’ who talk in an unintelligible language and work ridiculously unsociable hours in a world of bites and rams and hard drives.

Step out of the ‘black art’ Annabel Cornish and Belinda Kent – never remotely the nerds, attractive, intelligent, well-adjusted and determined to shed light into the darkest recesses of the cupboards occupied by things called servers and staffed by reclusive boffins.

Annabel and Belinda are the driving force behind ZebraHosts, a Newcastle IT business established to meet a growing need for businesses to store their data off-site.

ZebraHosts, a ‘data centre’, has been trading since 2001, launched after Annabel and her partner Nick Collins realised there was a demand for an alternative to humping around heavy computer equipment.

Annabel said: ‘You could actually witness people carrying heavy servers containing critical data around with them, even on the train – a situation which seems quite ridiculous now, particularly with the advent of high speed data communication.’

Essentially the primary purpose of a data centre is to provide companies with a place to store their business-critical information, taking advantage of a range of services, including 24 hour operation of the servers, various fail safes in the event of power failure or network collapse and the security of knowing a team of experts is readily on hand to offer assistance.

Annabel is a founding director and Belinda is the firm’s strategic account and project manager. Together they



Annabel Cornish

make a dynamic team, continually driving the business forward – creating a new, more positive meaning for the term ‘IT Girl’.

Both women have worked hard to get where they are, winning the respect of their peers and juggling successful careers with the demands of raising young families.

‘Nobody is going to give you success. It has to be won by striving to become the best at what you do,’ explains straight-talking Annabel.

‘Both Belinda and I fully appreciate this. Ok, sometimes it’s tough if you are working and are away from your children for longer than you would like and, yes, the old cliché is true – it is a balancing act between motherhood and career. But the rewards do outweigh the negatives. If everything in life was easy it would be less rewarding.’

Annabel has worked her way up since graduating with a degree in Design History from Manchester in 1991 and initially moved to Newcastle to pursue a marketing career before developing a customer relations department for a leading motor dealership.

Belinda was born and educated in South Africa, settling in the UK ten years ago. She has an extensive background in technical sales within industries as diverse as aviation and new media. She now fulfils a crucial role actively creating new business opportunities for ZebraHosts and, as a qualified PRINCE 2 practitioner, provides consultancy on the design of clients’ IT network systems.

Together the two are a formidable team, guiding a business that now employs 11 staff.

Belinda said: ‘We have a diverse range of both small and large businesses as customers. The smaller ones often find it much more cost effective to leave their IT to the experts, us.’

‘Orion Teamwear, which makes branded sports wear for schools and corporates, recently won their biggest-ever account and the managing director – former Newcastle Falcon Richard Metcalfe – credited ZebraHosts because, after we took over his server hosting responsibilities, it freed him up to concentrate on sales.’

‘Larger businesses such as Gosforth-based Imass, which employs 120 people and provides integrated software solutions to companies, where safety is a top priority, take advantage of our business continuity services.’

‘A service that includes a 26 ‘hot desk’ provision – work stations which are available to key Imass staff in the event they are unable to operate from their own offices following a power failure, flood or fire.’

To Annabel, skills, experience and talent are imperative to her business, and gender is irrelevant.

‘There is a perception out there that that women, and especially mothers, cannot do the job as well as men but



Belinda Kent

this is simply not the case. Look at Belinda and I. We both work in a male-dominated industry, lead successful, busy working lives and both of us are bringing up young families.'

With the recent launch of their new specialist consultancy division, ZebraConnects, neither looks set to be slowing down anytime soon.

Belinda said: 'We felt that a lot of our work for existing clients was administered on a consultancy basis anyway. Whether we are designing a new data centre, formulating an effective disaster recovery plan or ensuring internet connectivity is secure – it's all professional consultancy. So why not launch our own consultancy division?'

Zebrahosts, Adamson House, 65 Westgate Road, Newcastle Upon Tyne NE1 1SG. Tel: 0845 869 6824 or 0191 261 7555. www.zebrahosts.net?

Fact box
1995 Annabel launches Newcastle's first web design business with partner Nick Collins
2001 Annabel and Nick launch ZebraHosts, Newcastle's first data centre
2003 Belinda Kent joins ZebraHosts
2005 Imass becomes a ZebraHosts' client
2008 Launch of ZebraConnects

Take the stage, girls

Are you a women running a successful business in a traditional man's world? If so, we'd like to hear from you with a view to featuring you in north East Life magazine. Contact the editors on neleditor@archant.co.uk or sue.campbell@archant.co.uk



Belinda Kent and Annabel Cornish, changing the image of IT experts