

A photograph of the Accenture logo mounted on a wall. The logo consists of a white chevron symbol above the word "accenture" in a lowercase, sans-serif font. The wall is a light, neutral color, and the background of the entire page is a deep red. On the right side, a portion of a person's shoulder and arm in a patterned jacket is visible.

accenture

Julie Spillane FCCA heads up Accenture's European shared-services hub in Dublin. She talks to **Donal Nugent** about a concept that has transformed how global corporations do business

AN IRISH ACCENT ON THE FUTURE



Interesting people, they say, have even more interesting parents. Likewise, out-of-the-ordinary companies can usually locate their progressive traits deep within the corporate DNA.

Accenture's origins go back to 1953 when the accounting firm Arthur Andersen, working as consultants to General Electric, installed the first commercial-computer application in the US. The UNIVAC – 14,000kg of cutting-edge 1950s computing – successfully automated GE's payroll and led to a new business-and-technology consulting division emerging from within the accounting firm. Success built on success and, by the late 1980s, Andersen Consulting was ready to go it alone. The split from Arthur Andersen paved the way for continued growth throughout the booming '90s, to the point where its revenues actually began to exceed that of the former parent company.

The subsequent name change to Accenture, inspired by the phrase 'Accent on the future', came early in the last decade and proved far more propitious than anyone could have imagined as the company is, today, a global leader in management, technology and outsourcing consultancy. While the company's gleaming glass offices in Grand Canal Square make it an obvious flag waver for Dublin's newest and smartest business district, what's less obvious is that, in September 2009, Accenture's place of incorporation was changed from Bermuda to Ireland, making this Fortune 500

* ACCA AND ME

'I first heard about ACCA when I was doing my post-graduate diploma in business studies at University College Galway. It appealed to me as a strong, internationally recognised qualification that would provide flexibility in my career options, so I decided to study for my exams after completing my third-level education,' Julie Spillane says.

Her first accountancy job was performing creditors reconciliations for a hotel chain. As she progressed in her accountancy roles, and became more senior, she says she 'started to see things end-to-end' and it was here that ACCA became particularly relevant to her everyday work.

'I have gotten enormous benefit out of my qualification. Several of my formative roles would not have been possible without a professional accountancy qualification. It can be difficult to study and work at the same time, but I would absolutely recommend the ACCA qualification, as it is really a long-term investment in your career.'

Accenture has strong links with ACCA, a relationship Spillane sees as growing in importance as the organisation focuses on complex, value-added activities that require specialised skill-sets which ACCA graduates can bring. 'It is crucial to our business that we attract and retain the right talent. Accenture's accreditation as an ACCA Approved Employer, and the subsequent awards we have received from ACCA, have significantly helped us attract and keep the best people – many of them ACCA graduates.'



company a late but significant addition to Ireland's corporate crown.

Shared services

Accenture currently employs approximately 1,200 people across its management consulting, technology and outsourcing practices at its offices in Dublin and Belfast. Ireland has enjoyed growing strategic significance for the company since 1999, when it first established its European Service Centre (ESC) in Dublin. Until then, each office in its European network largely operated their own administrative services. Accenture was one of the early adopters of the shared-services concept, and Dublin its second such facility internationally. The European focus has since expanded to include the Middle East and Africa (EMEA) and, today, the operations centre manages 15 European and Middle Eastern countries.

Julie Spillane FCCA is EMEA director for shared services and Ireland finance director at Accenture. Born in England, Spillane's family moved back to Limerick when she was one. Attending Laurel Hill Coláiste, a gael scoil, she went on to study electronic engineering in University College Galway, where she figured out 'pretty quickly that this was probably not where my future lay!' Spillane saw the degree through, however, acknowledging years later that it did not prove to be time wasted. 'Studying engineering gave me a good insight into how to think logically and mathematically, which stands me in good stead today,' she reflects. Spillane's next foray into academia would, however, prove altogether more successful at helping her hit her career stride. 'I went on to undertake a post-graduate diploma in business studies in UCG and was immediately hooked,' she recalls. She then began to study for her ACCA exams once she had graduated.

Building on some early experience in temping, Spillane's first real

accountancy role was with the software company Epicor in Dublin. New and fast growing, 'it was the ideal environment for me to test what I was learning from my ACCA classes. The nature of a start-up is that there is always something new to be done and if you put your hand up quickly enough, you get to take it on'. Her next key position was also another important jump, as she became finance director for a start-up CD manufacturing company in Ireland, operated by a French privately-owned company called MPO. Here, Spillane proved herself on a number of fronts, not least linguistically. 'Not only did I get thrown in at the deep end in terms of finance and start-up skills, I needed to do it *en français*'.

Decisions

A company she had admired from a distance, the opportunity to join Accenture came in 1999, as the ESC was being established. Spillane jumped at a chance to 'move to a bigger, more global company who could provide a longer-term career path, and where I could learn from more senior finance people and strong business leaders. It was also an opportunity to get involved at the start of something new and exciting, and definitely the best career decision I ever made!'

Over the next decade, Spillane's roles were diverse, though with the values of learning and leadership to the fore. She has overseen operational management of large finance teams, been global process owner for requisition to pay and EMEA architect for Accenture's SAP implementation. Today, in her current role, she is responsible for over 400 people across two European locations. It is an evolution of responsibilities that has neatly dovetailed with the evolution of the shared-services concept itself. 'Its role has changed significantly as the shared services industry has developed globally,' she says. 'The types of activities the ESC now undertakes are

far more complex and far more strategic to our business than when we first started out back in 1999. Gone are the days when shared services was viewed as suitable for accounts payable and other processing functions only. Today, we work across a range of business functions to drive strategic change.'

Spillane sees the underlying value of the concept as two-fold. 'By taking the management overhead and effort associated with services from the local offices, you can focus on delivering high-quality standardised services from Dublin.' Add to this the reduction in cost-per-transaction of over 50%, savings of over €40 million annually accrued on procurement costs alone, and a compelling picture emerges.

There is also the fact, of course, that, as a business consultancy organisation, the experience gained from what was, at the time, a pioneering move, fed naturally into the company's own work. Spillane notes it has allowed them to 'help many clients develop a suitable platform to support their continued growth, increase efficiency, improve service levels, achieve economies of scale and increase profits'.

People

Accenture is, by its nature, a multicultural company and its international workforce reflects the values of a business committed to investing in people. With over 2,700 accounting professionals working in its network of over 40 global delivery centres, Spillane comments that the roles they play are a little different from traditional accountancy. 'As well as needing strong technical accounting expertise (often combining US, Irish and European GAAP), we also focus on being able to manage large teams and drive process improvement through our Six Sigma programme.'

In the ESC, the picture of multiculturalism is particularly evident.

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Just under 50% of staff here are from overseas while two-thirds of its native-English speaking staff speak a second language. Spillane's immediate management team includes three of the 30 nationalities represented in the Dublin office: South African, Columbian and Argentinian. 'A very diverse bunch!' she notes.

Achievement

In 2009, the achievements of the ESC were recognised by the Contact Centre Management Association who named it the International Shared Service Centre of the Year at their annual awards. Judges cited the breadth and complexity of its services, as well as quality and continuous-improvement initiatives, as key to its victory.

Spillane adds that a set of 'people programmes', facilitating training and development, ensures the right opportunities present themselves to those determined to embrace them. 'We employ ambitious people looking to build their skills and experience so, as a company, we must constantly innovate and create smarter ways of doing things. It's not just about improving our services, but retaining the best people and keeping them engaged with their work and our organisation'.

Accenture's engagement programme for women, Accent on Women, aims to increase the profile of senior female executives in its marketplaces. A calendar of events and a mentoring programme all play their part in keeping up the momentum.

However, whether male or female, Spillane's observations on building a career are that planning and direction are critical. 'The first thing is to take ownership of your own career development,' she says, pinpointing a need to identify the desired end and then building a track record of successes that create opportunities to achieve it. She is a believer, too, that gathering experience from as many different sectors and industries as possible is hugely valuable. 'All executives must keep their skills fresh and relevant, so continuing professional development (CPD) and training is paramount. It's also very important for executives to build their personal networks and contacts, whether across their organisation or, external to the

company, across the local business community.' For her own part, Spillane consciously sets out to refresh her approach to networking every few years, believing it is an executive's own obligation to inject impetus and vigour into the process. 'No-one should think that career opportunities simply fall from the sky. Progression always has to be chased and created and you need to make sure you are ready when those opportunities come.' Formal evidence of this ongoing commitment came when Spillane recently completed a certificate in corporate governance at UCD.

Future

Living in Dublin for 15 years, Spillane and husband Richard have two children, Conor and Sarah. Looking to the future, she is optimistic the country will remain a place that can offer a future to the coming generation. 'The quality of our national workforce, our English-speaking population and Ireland's position with the EU are all positive factors we must not lose sight of,' she comments.

To refresh this sense of optimism, Spillane need do little more than look out her office window. When that fledgling precursor to Accenture emerged in the 1950s, the idea that Ireland, then an economic non-entity, could one day host an array of global organisations would have been laugh-out-loud funny. To imagine, in the early 1980s, that the desolate wasteland that stretched between Dublin's Custom's House and the Irish Sea could be a vibrant, international business district, would have evoked a similar response. Both, however, have come to pass. Spillane agrees that, despite recent challenging economic times, 'Ireland is, and will remain, a good place to do business. I think once the global economy recovers, and as Ireland moves out of recession, we will see a return to inward investment and growth.'

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