Dee Tippett: Women just want to get things done!

In the summer of 2008 Ahold asked VA-Search to look for a new lead of Enterprise Architecture, managing a team of around 10 architects. The preference was to find a great Enterprise Architect with a strong track-record in retail and experience with rolling out standardised software. In addition the person should have good management skills and there was a preference for a female. As the Dutch market proved too small, we set-up a European search and we introduced Dee Tippett within a few weeks and she was hired soon after. We recently caught up with her and this is what she had to tell:

How did you experience your start at Ahold:

I had been working at DSG International (a European conglomerate focussed on retailing consumer electronics, which at that time included Dixons, Currys, PC World, Pixmania, Elkjop) for 7.5 years as an Enterprise Applications Architect. DSG had grown in Europe through acquisitions, but operated largely autonomously by country: during my time there, the strategy evolved to include ambitions to centralise and standardise wherever possible and I was involved in several elements of this, so the Ahold goals were quite familiar. In 2008 I was ready for a new challenge. For me, working in Amsterdam was not life-changing, I was living in Scotland and I was used to working in Hertfordshire (near London) and other places (such as Paris and Oslo) for DSG. Travelling to Amsterdam did not make a big difference for me, but the cultural change is big - the Dutch are very, very blunt! The British may find they are rude. Luckily, I had worked in The Netherlands before, so I knew what to expect and the fact is that the Dutch don't want to be rude, but are simply very direct. I use it now to my advantage: if I really want to make a point, I say "OK, I'm going to be Dutch now" and then everyone knows I am going to say something VERY honest! What I also still notice is that getting a decision is tough in the Netherlands: the 'poldering' drives everybody crazy from time to time: a lot of people are involved in the decision making process and everybody is allowed to challenge everything. This also has a major upside: at many other organisations, it is quite a risk to say to your boss "you are wrong!", whereas at Ahold that is actually appreciated. What I also find is that the Dutch are very welcoming: people are very hospitable and it's also very easy in the Netherlands to join clubs and build a social life. When you are coming out of the train station in some countries and look confused, the local people look at you and ignore you – or even enjoy that you are lost: in the Netherlands someone will come up to you and ask if they can help!

How did you experience moving country:

You have to think it through. In my case, I didn't relocate: I was used to travelling during the week – I have done that type of thing for a lot of my career - and therefore there is not a big difference in travelling to Hertfordshire or Amsterdam. But I often see people who initially like the idea of moving country but the challenge of moving their partner, kids etc. gets too much and they pull out of the process. The biggest change is culture: it's important to realise that moving country means being part of a different culture and you shouldn't expect other people to think the same way, you need to keep checking that you understand each other. I am fortunate that I grew up as part of an Asian family in the UK and have had a diverse IT career which means I have already worked a lot internationally. My short summary is that in the US people are much more positive and self-confident; in Europe people are quite self-critical and sometimes too modest; in Asia hierarchies are very important and saying "yes" means foremost "I heard what you said", not necessarily that I agree with you or am even the right person to talk to. We are all so different – the Netherlands particularly is FULL of diverse cultures - but I find that exciting and it gives me energy!

What have you achieved over the last 5 years:

My main contribution that I see is boosting the positioning of my architecture team at Ahold. We are now very well connected to the business and complimented on adding value. Enterprise Architecture is still sometimes seen as an "ivory tower" which delivers little business value and gets in the way of getting things done. I am a very practical person – it is important to me that my team is seen to deliver value whist defining and moving towards a strategic target. We are now recognised as important players in supporting what the business wants to do and helping to make further steps easier. Enterprise Architecture should be all about keeping a close eye on the bigger picture that the business wants to achieve – not only "where do we want to go" but – maybe more importantly – "how are we going to get there". It is the Enterprise Architect's responsibility to bring insight into the consequences of each of our choices, so that there are no unpleasant surprises in the future. The task of Enterprise Architecture is to ensure that we are equipped to make well-informed choices; definitely not to obstruct progress. An Enterprise Architect should have the mind-set of "how can this be achieved in the optimal way": doing things "tactically" is hard for many Enterprise Architects, but in my team we understand that if the consequences of a short-term approach are properly understood, it may be the right thing to do for our business right now. Then it is our job to revise the strategic plan and roadmap to help us get "back on track"!

Why are there so few woman in IT architecture?

There are lots of different reasons which all play a part, I think. Firstly, a lot of people see architecture as a technical job and woman are often less attracted to this; they simply don't consider being an IT Architect and there aren't many of us as role models. The fact is that - in my mind at least - architecture is not technical at all; it's about logical thinking, something that a lot of woman are very good at! Secondly - and this is a bit more of a general remark on why less woman are in senior roles than men - it's that woman take some time off to have kids and this generates a mid-career break which makes moving into strategic roles harder (this is a simply a fact – it's unrealistic to expect that career breaks have no impact). Thirdly, woman are often less into the whole political side of having a senior "technical" role: it is a male-dominated setting, it can be a very competitive, testorone fuelled environment and that can be frustrating for us woman - we just want to get things done! Of course, this is all self-perpetuating: I think more senior women would be a good thing, the diversity it brings adds immense value to any organisation.