



Level: All
Works with: All
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Perspectives from Jeanette Horan

Interview by
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As vice-president of development and support, Jeanette Horan's view of Lotus products extends from the details of defining and developing new features and products to the real-world experience of customers. This month, she joins us in discussing how she works with customers, the value of customer and developer relations efforts (including the launch of LDD), and what she sees as Lotus's short-term and long-term development priorities.

Your title is vice-president of development and support. What does this position entail?

I'm responsible for all the developers and technical support professionals working on the Lotus branded products. We have many locations worldwide, with most of our development team located in Massachusetts. My role is to set the technology strategy and to ensure that our products are delivered and supported as committed by our business plans. Our major quality and customer satisfaction initiatives are driven by my team.

So you get involved in strategic directions as well as execution?

Absolutely. As a member of the senior executive team at Lotus, I work with my peers to define our business and technical strategies and to ensure that my team is working on projects aligned with those strategies.

Let's start on the support side of the equation. I know that customer relations is one of your priorities. What do you do in that space?

I get involved in many kinds of customer discussions, from pre-sales or marketing activities to helping to resolve customer issues when our products are installed. I'm often in the briefing center or out visiting customers—not only to share our plans but also to listen to the customers. The input we get from customers is invaluable in helping us to shape our future planning activities. We have started some new programs this year to get customers more actively engaged with us in our product development process, so I get involved in discussions on the benefits of participation and tracking progress along the project.

**How do you decide which customers to visit?**

Generally, I'm responding to requests from sales reps, or from the customer themselves if they need help in getting issues resolved or in getting more detailed information on our products. I'm also an executive sponsor for some of our key customers, which allows me to build a deeper relationship with the customer to help them realize maximum value from their investments with us.

When you head for a customer site, how do you structure your time, who do you talk to, what do you hope to gain?

I'm usually there to both listen and talk. I usually meet with senior staff in the IT department, often the CIO. My staff helps me to prepare to make sure that the customer's time is used appropriately. Before I head out, I'm briefed on the customer's current usage and experience with our products, any open support issues, any pending business transactions, and what the customer hopes to achieve from the visit. Most times, I will have a presentation to go through with the customer to guide the discussion. I hope to gain a deeper understanding on what the customer's needs are, to share our plans to help them meet those needs, and to reinforce our commitment to our partnership with them.

Can you tell me specifically about some of your recent visits with customers? What was it like? What did you learn?

Since Lotusphere, where we announced our future technology strategy, I have spent time in the briefing center with several CIOs and their staffs taking them through the details of the strategy and getting their feedback and hearing their concerns. We are getting overwhelming endorsement of the strategy, and we usually have an active dialog about their current environment and how they'll integrate it into our future directions. My other recent customer visits have been with customers planning their upgrade to Notes 6 and Domino 6. We've been recruiting customers to engage in our Top Tier and beta testing programs, and it's great to see the level of enthusiasm for the new release. It's interesting that I have not had many customer calls recently where the customer has been unhappy about a support experience—this shows that our emphasis on supporting our customers and focusing on customer satisfaction is working.

How do you take feedback from these visits and bring it back into the development process? Can you give some examples?

I always take time to ask questions about the business problems that our customers are facing and what they are looking for in terms of IT solutions to those problems. Right now, I'm hearing a lot about e-mail overload, so our work in alternate solutions like instant messaging or team rooms becomes an interesting discussion. Also, bringing this input into our research program to look at new user paradigms is key. Most customers have some wish list items for our products—for example, they love QuickPlace but really want to see us beef up the enterprise attributes of the product, things like better administration. We've incorporated a lot of this feedback into our plans for QuickPlace 2.6, which is due out this summer.

What's most challenging about this process?

Well, everyone has their favorite list of things they'd like to see us do! So the challenge is in prioritizing and focusing on the things that will deliver the most value to the most customers. Sometimes, it's just not possible to accommodate a particular customer's request, and it's also difficult to have to go back and deliver the bad news.

What about business partners?

In many ways, business partners have very similar needs from my team as do our customers. They need to understand our directions and want detailed information on how they can work with us and our products. We have a number of strategic alliance, or technology partners, who we work with more closely, often times on joint development projects—things like our Unified Messaging partnerships with Avaya, Captaris, and Cisco.

And, what about the developer community?

Our developer community exists in both business partners and customers. Most of our technologies provide both end user applications (like e-mail or e-learning) as well as a development platform for value added applications. As we move into the new era of contextual collaboration, we expect our community of developers to expand in both of these constituencies.

How does the launching of the Lotus Developer Domain play into and support this?

LDD is one-stop-shopping for these developers. It will be the single place where they can get access to all of the information they need. Everything from downloads of the latest code, to product or technology information, to bulletin board discussions with their peers and our developers. And they will get access to information on all of our products in one place at last.

What are your expectations for the Lotus Developer Domain? What do you see as its key roles?

I would like to see this become a vibrant community place where developers can learn about our current products and our future directions. Over the past few years, we have introduced many new technologies to deliver more business value—yet still too many people only know about Notes and Domino. So, by bringing it all together in one place, we can show developers the true power of our entire portfolio and encourage them to develop even more compelling applications.

What's your favorite part of the site? What do you think brings the most value to developers?

I like the discussion forums. When I get time, I like to browse through the discussions to see what people are doing and where they need help. It's great to see the "self help" nature of the discussions. The open sharing of tips and tricks is incredibly valuable.

LDD's predecessor, Notes.net, played a key role in the early deployment of Notes and Domino, and LDD plans to continue that role for all Lotus products. What value does this early deployment bring to the development process?

This is a key part of our testing process. The more "real world" usage we get of our products before they are shipped, the more confident we are in the quality and stability of the products. Plus, it gives users some interesting ideas on things they will be able to do with the new release when it becomes generally available.

One of the goals of LDD is to showcase Lotus technology and let users try it out. For instance, the iNotes Web Access demo gave users a chance to actually use the product as it was being developed. What sort of other live demos would you like LDD to host?

The key here is extending beyond the core messaging products. How about some e-Learning courses related to our new products? Imagine if you could take people through an online tutorial, and schedule some live virtual classroom sessions with developers—all part of our awareness and education for new product introductions. I'd also love to see a real portal and Discovery Server demo that is really useful to our community of users.

How does LDD fit into the Lotus strategy and the IBM Software Groups overall strategy?

LDD is a key communication vehicle for us with our developer community. The other Software Group brands also have developer domains, and we are striving to deliver a consistently high level of service to our developers. Today, there are few developers who only use one set of technologies, so we want to enable people to get a consistent experience across the Lotus, Websphere, and DB2 domains.

From the development perspective, what are your top priorities, both short-term and long-term?

In the short term, we need to deliver on Notes 6 and Domino 6, as well as major refreshes of just about every other product in our portfolio! We have a big focus just now on delivering enterprise robustness in all of our products. This has become critical as our customers now see our products as part of their mission-critical infrastructure. Longer term, we need to be looking at new technologies—how we deliver our collaborative capabilities on a J2EE platform, or how we can exploit open source technologies like Linux. I also have a passion for innovation and am pushing my teams to think about how we can significantly enhance end user experience

and productivity.

What technologies excite you the most?

Anything to do with user experience and user paradigms. We have a great partnership with IBM Research that has allowed us to bring out some really innovative products like Discovery Server—taking some tried-and-true concepts and pushing the envelope to make them really usable by end users.

There have been a lot of questions and speculation about the future of Notes and Domino. Can you clarify where Notes and Domino are going?

Notes and Domino will continue to evolve. We have tens of millions of users of Notes and Domino today who use the product for many aspects of their business lives. Some are mostly focused on mail and calendaring; but most have their own applications that they developed over the years on the platform. It is still the most secure platform for applications, and its rapid application development environment is second to none. Given the size of our installed base, I'm looking at moving the product forward in smaller incremental steps. It's very hard for our customers to absorb the big releases that we have been working on for 3+ years—so I think you'll see "6next" (or whatever we decide to call it!) coming in a shorter time period with less radical changes to make it easier for customers to keep up with us.

What about the next generation of products from Lotus? Can you give us a preview of what to expect?

We're moving into a new era of contextual collaboration. The work on Web Services (WSDL, SOAP, UDDI) has now progressed to the point where we can express our technologies as components that can be used in the context of any application. This will allow us to continue to deliver applications such as Sametime, but also to allow another application to make use of the presence awareness and instant messaging services in a more seamless manner. So our next generation of products will exploit these services and be delivered on a J2EE platform. Many of these products will look or feel like the products we deliver today, but they will also enable us to deliver new products for things like dynamic workplaces.

What do you mean by contextual collaboration?

This simply means using collaborative tools from within any application. A portal is a simple, easy to use example. You want to be able to see who is on-line and immediately enter into a chat, for example, from any of the portlets within your portal. Or you want to be able to send an e-mail message from within your CRM application, without having to switch to a different e-mail client. We need to provide our capabilities as services that can be called from another application.

How do these next generation features fit together? How do they fit into the broader, IBM SWG picture? And why should our audience care about that bigger picture?

Lotus is all about delivering innovative collaborative capabilities to end users—we call it "enabling the minds of e-business." Our peers in the Software Group focus on different aspects of delivering infrastructure to support these kinds of applications. I view Lotus as an internal ISV to the other brands—I use what they deliver and drive requirements into their planning processes to help them support the kinds of applications we, and other customers, want to develop. For our audience, they will have the benefit of using the most powerful middleware tools in the industry and have the confidence that we have tested and integrated all of the pieces together.

If you could make a prediction, what do you think is Lotus's "Next Big Thing?"

That's a hard one! We have many emerging technologies that have the promise of radically altering the way people think about their usage of technology. Both e-learning and knowledge discovery have enormous potential as the technologies mature and customers start to see the potential return to their bottom line. Dealing with information overload is just about the biggest challenge we all face in our business lives, and we're investigating many possibilities for how we can help people with this.