# A True story

**In August Fastbolt Distributors (UK) Ltd appointed Amanda True to the board of directors after 14 years with the company. Will Lowry took the opportunity to visit the Milton Keynes based company to find out how Amanda progressed from management trainee to IT director.**

Amanda True joined Fastbolt straight from University in 1997 as a management trainee, after achieving a first class BA Hons in Mathematics and Management Studies. Her original role was to gain experience in the different departments to enable her to get an overview of the company, with the aim to recommend how improvements could be made.

It was an experience that she says still helps in her role today. "Because of the knowledge I obtained whilst working in the different departments, and understanding how they are organised, I can improve how they work together to make processes more efficient."

After spending a year working across the company Amanda was appointed as IT manager, with a primary responsibility to evaluate the risks of established computer systems moving into the year 2000, the so-called Millennium bug.

"There was apprehension whether the German system and UK system would be year 2000 compatible," explains Amanda. "At this point we started looking at a new computer system and I was appointed as the key contact to manage its implementation."

Amanda worked with the logistics director to implement the new SAP system across both UK and German offices, organising and liaising with the provider of the customised software.

"We went live in the UK in November 1999 and in Germany in April 2000. I can remember the date we went live in the UK, it was Monday 22nd November and I woke up with a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach," laughs Amanda. "Whilst it was worrying what might happen, it was also exciting. We had done a lot of preparation and although there were going to be three to six months of hard work, we knew it would be worth it."

Looking back would Amanda change anything? "In hindsight we probably tried to make the SAP system too similar to the old system, and it would have been better to have started with a clean slate and seen what we could do better," says Amanda. "However, any problems we did have were quickly resolved and I think it is the best decision we made, especially using the SAP system."

The SAP system gave Fastbolt a lot of opportunities to improve processes and the company's overall efficiency. Before the installation the UK and German offices used different systems, making it difficult to exchange data. The SAP system enables both offices to view each other's inventory and to share an extensive range of other information.

"From a stock management point of view it enables us to see the stock in both offices," highlights Amanda. "This gives us the opportunity to accurately predict what we are going to need in the future. We benefit from economies of scale combining the requirements of both companies to a consolidated purchase order. That enhances our purchasing power, ensures more effective use of our working capital and, most importantly, higher levels of availability and customer satisfaction."

Amanda continues: "We can also easily view customer history and a range of other transactional information. Those capabilities in turn provide the basis for a stronger, more effective relationship with our customers."

It is clear that Amanda has a real passion for her role, and her natural curiosity has enabled her to expand her experience and knowledge. "I love to know how things work. When the installation company were setting up the SAP system they spent a lot of time showing me how things were customised, and what they were doing. Because I saw the background work and know how the system has been set up, I am able to confidently and accurately make changes to the system."

Since the installation in 2000 Amanda has managed the system and uses the knowledge she obtained from the installation process to customise the SAP system and

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▶▶▶ enhance procedures. "Over the years there have been so many things that we have tweaked and developed and we are always looking at what else we can do to make things simpler and better. That is another big benefit of choosing the SAP system; I don't think we would have been able to make as many changes if we hadn't chosen it."

As well as being responsible for the current IT systems, Amanda is working on introducing a new Warehouse Management System (WMS), which will enable Fastbolt to automate many of the operations in both UK and German warehouses.

"At the moment we are using a paper based system, involving printing of picking sheets, which isn't very productive or efficient," explains Amanda. "The new WMS will automate it. Barcode scanning will reduce picking errors and pickers will be told in what order to pick the products. The usage of the trucks will also become more efficient, as the system will know where trucks are and won't send another truck down a busy aisle. Put simply it will enable us to make everything more productive, efficient and less hard work."

Depending on system compatibility, Amanda also intends to link the new WMS directly to the carrier system, so that immediately the picker confirms an order the labels and the paperwork will automatically be printed and ready for when the boxes are packed.

Fastbolt is currently in the process of getting the test system for the WMS up and running, which will enable it to make sure the flow of information between the WMS and its SAP system is smooth and there are no problems.

Amanda's main responsibility is the link and flow of information between the two systems, making sure it is seamless. "To connect the two systems we will be using IDocs, which are electronic files that contain all the necessary information. Every time we send a picking note to the warehouse, it will contain an IDoc, which will be read into the WMS. The challenge at the moment is to get the different programs to run from different entry points in the system, and to make sure the system recognises the IDoc. We also need to ensure that the new WMS will link into the customisation that we have made in the SAP system."

An IDoc, incidentally is an intermediate document, used by SAP for electronic data interchange (EDI) between application programs. It's a self contained text file that can be transmitted directly to a chosen workstation.

To thoroughly evaluate the WMS before it is fully implemented Fastbolt has a test environment, which is a mirror image of the real system.

"With the new IDocs and WMS I am testing as much as I can to ensure that we are fully prepared for when we go live," says Amanda. "The simplicity of the IDoc makes it easy to transfer between the two systems. The fun part is going to be keeping the flow between the two systems up to date, because, especially within the UK, the requirements of the market mean that you have to be able to offer a quick service."

Whilst the test environment will allow Fastbolt to prepare for when the WMS goes live, Amanda is only too aware that the important part will be effectively handling any issues that may arise.

"You can test as much as you like, but there is always something that will happen when you go live," states Amanda. "It is important to be prepared and think quickly on how you can resolve the issue and move on. The experience we had when implementing the SAP system will help us with this as we have been through the process before."

The German WMS is planned to go live in December 2011, with the UK WMS (requiring some extra customisation) due to go live within the first six months of 2012.

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"Everyone is keen to see the new WMS on board and benefit from the efficiencies and improvements that the new system will bring," says Amanda. "There is a real excitement in the company at being able to develop how we currently do things. We are always looking to make sure that the flow of information, from taking the order to getting the delivery out, is as efficient and quick as possible and the new WMS will help us to get a step closer."

It is this dedication to developing Fastbolt's IT system and Amanda's ability to constantly enhance procedures, based on a first hand understanding of all of the company's processes, which has seen Amanda rise through the company. Her contribution to Fastbolt's continuous commitment to improving its efficiency and already high customer service standards, has now been deservedly recognised through her appointment as director. She, though, remains modest as ever.

"I just enjoy doing my job. I'm naturally an inquisitive person who needs to know how things work and how they can be made better. Luckily, with our test environment, I am able to play around with the system and can introduce processes that will answer my own curiosity, and more importantly help all the departments become more efficient, which ultimately enhances Fastbolt's reputation as a company absolutely committed to meeting its customers' needs."