

IT Role Model: Veera Johnson - from supermarket to marketplace

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It takes persistence to go from supermarket checkout girl to Asian Business Woman of the Year. But Veera Johnson has persistence in abundance.

As chief executive of ProcServe, a PA Consulting venture company that runs an online marketplace called Zanzibar, she certainly needs it, as its mission is to drive unnecessary cost out of government procurement processes - where plenty of previous initiatives have failed.

So far, so good - in May, Zanzibar was pinpointed as key to delivering public sector savings in a UK Treasury report looking at the collaborative procurement element of the government's operational efficiency programme, published by Martin Jay, the chairman of Invensys.

Zanzibar enables buyers to access details of the best-value deals on a wide range of goods and services; to order them securely, in a way that integrates with back-end ledger and payment systems; and to see, at a glance, how much money is being spent, on what and by whom, within their organisation.

It is already used by a wide range of public bodies, from large central departments, including the Department for Work and Pensions, to individual primary schools.

"The challenge is that procurement isn't seen as a 'sexy' field, so we have to work hard to get attention and to get people on the front-line using Zanzibar," says Ms Johnson. "But when they do, the response is really positive, because we've made it as simple to use as Amazon."

Does she ever get frustrated with the sluggish pace of change in government processes?

"All the time," she admits. "I'm quite a go-getting person, but I've learned to temper my impatience with the understanding that change takes time, especially in an area like procurement, where many organisations haven't deviated from existing processes and hierarchies for years."

That go-getting nature was clear from early on in her career. Now 43, she left school at 15 to work at a branch of Asda in her home town of Preston, Lancashire. But when she moved to a receptionist job with the local council, she quickly became bored - "so I set about reorganising libraries and filing systems at the town hall".

At the same time, she spent her evenings studying for A-levels at a local further education college.

That led to a part-time degree and, subsequently, an MBA. Throughout her studies, she worked as a civil servant.

The combination of public-sector experience and educational achievement eventually led to her being headhunted by PA Consulting in 1997. The Zanzibar initiative began life as an internal project at the firm, becoming a separate venture company, with Ms Johnson at its helm, in 2006.

Now, Ms Johnson's priority is getting Zanzibar installed as widely as possible in the UK public sector in order to meet government targets, as well as in commercial organisations worldwide.

"When we've connected suppliers to the system, many of these commercial organisations have asked if they can use it for their own procurement processes - and there's no reason why they shouldn't, because procurement processes don't differ that much across the private and public sector," she says.

Commercial clients currently include CB Richard Ellis, the property company, and NCR, the ATM manufacturer.

Despite spending one week out of four travelling overseas, Ms Johnson still finds time to campaign for Shelter, the homelessness charity, to be a mentor at Wandsworth Women's Aid and indulge her passion for creating works of abstract art.

The nomination for the Asian Women of Achievement Awards came as a surprise, she says. To go on to win was a "huge honour and very humbling". In her acceptance speech, she told attendees: "This is great news for everyone at ProcServe but I won't forget that at heart, I'm just a girl from Preston."

She admits she would like more "down time": "But when you find the right job for you, it becomes everything and you don't resent the time it takes up at all," she says. "Plus, my job is about helping us all to pay less taxes. That's a great motivator."