Cutting Her Own Trail

TiVo CFO and Cal Poly grad Anna Brunelle sets the course for her success

By Stacia Momburg

TiVo Chief Financial Officer Anna Brunelle (B.S., Business Administration, 1996) has risen quickly in her career by identifying gaps wherever she’s worked and quickly stepping in to fill them.

From her first job while she was still a Cal Poly student to her current role with the nation’s largest digital video recording company, the 41-year-old has met every challenge and capitalized on every opportunity for professional advancement.

“I’ve never been afraid to take on more responsibility,” she said, “and that’s netted me some success.”

She traces the roots of her work ethic to her father, who sold shampoos and conditioners to health food stores in the U.S. and Canada in the 1970s.

“His entrepreneurial spirit generated creative ideas,” she said, “so I learned to be creative. I also learned that if you want something, you have to be willing to do the work to get it.”

Brunelle began her career while still taking business courses at Cal Poly. She started as a bookkeeper for $7 an hour with Complete Development Services, Inc., a $50 million company in San Luis Obispo. Immediately, she began expanding her job duties – securing insurance, bonding, personnel and working with city, county and state agencies on public works projects.

“The owners were out in the field a lot, so I was given more responsibility” she said. When she left, she was making around $30,000 a year – “a lucrative job by a 26-year-old’s standard,” she said, “considering I was still a college student and considering what wages were at that time in SLO.”

Deloitte and Touche recruited Brunelle for an audit staff position during her senior year, and she joined the Bay Area company after graduating. She often worked seven days a week, carrying three IPO clients back-to-back that first summer.

“The experience led to a promotion and increased my knowledge and skill set very quickly,” Brunelle said. “It was also why the work hours tended to be long.

“My goal was to earn my CPA, and Deloitte was the best company to train with to get my license.”

Brunelle moved on to P-Com, also in the Bay Area. The long hours continued as she traveled frequently to Italy.

“I learned a lot about time management,” she said, “because I was traveling, working 14-hour days and sleeping on planes. I think I spent more time in Italy than at home.”

The company was changing rapidly. Turnover was high, and as a senior staff member Brunelle was responsible for raising extra capital. As opportunities for growth presented themselves, Brunelle took them.

“Employees would leave, and positions weren’t always filled,” she said. “So I took on more and more responsibility.”

Brunelle eventually moved on to Roxio – a CD-burning software company. She was on the senior team that negotiated a $5 million buyout of file sharing company Napster in 2002. At the
time, Roxio was in the process of acquiring online music store Press Play. Roxio joined Napster and Press Play and re-launched Napster as a pay service.

As Roxio’s vice president and corporate controller, Brunelle was responsible for the due diligence and prep work on the buyout and for integration of the re-launched Napster.

Brunelle joined TiVo in 2005. As CFO, she is responsible for the company’s financial operations including accounting, tax, treasury, purchasing, internal audit, financial reporting and planning.

She served as its vice president, controller and treasurer before becoming CFO in September 2008. When the position came open, TiVo CEO Tom Rogers hired an interim person, and Brunelle saw another opportunity.

“I was responsible for assisting the interim CFO and showing him TiVo processes,” she said. “This gave me several opportunities to work directly with Tom and give him enough confidence in me that he eventually offered me the position.”

Along the way, Brunelle’s talent for seeing holes and filling them has translated into her personal life. At 23, while still in school and working for Complete Development Services, she took over mortgage on a house. To make the payments, she rented three rooms and became a landlord. Later, she sold the property for a $175,000 profit and then re-invested the money in an apartment complex in Sunnyvale that she still owns.

Brunelle’s work ethic and business-like approach are also evidenced in how she met the man she married. When she decided she was ready to embark on a long-term relationship, she mapped out several social activities that would expose her to a broader network of people. The payoff was immediate: At her first activity, ballroom dancing, she met David Johnson, another newcomer.

“It was actually his first and last attempt at ballroom,” Brunelle said, laughing.

They struck an immediate partnership, stumbling and laughing their way through the class. Both of them were so bad at it, she admits, that “we left early and had coffee nearby. Over coffee we made plans for a first date. That first meeting led to marriage.”

Brunelle recalls that she sought out academic challenges as far back as her Cal Poly days. Her favorite class was a senior accounting course with Earl Keller that focused on mergers and acquisitions.

There was no text book, Brunelle said. Keller created his own teaching materials, which included a four-ring binder of photocopied material.

“He’d put a problem on the board and expect us to know the answer from having read ahead,” she said. “If we read ahead and finished the problem, we got out of class 10 to 15 minutes early, and I read ahead as much as possible so we could get out early.

“I loved Dr. Keller’s class. I actually took all of his classes that I could fit into my schedule - I think three or four total – because he pushed his students hard, and I learned more from him as a result.”