

South Africa's

# Leading Managers

2003

**BUSINESSREPORT**  
Corporate Research Foundation

Name and surname	Suzanne Ravenall
Company name	IDCS
Business title	Chief executive officer
Job description	Founder and current head of IDCS, an outsource operational implementation solutions provider
Age	33
Years of experience	16 years, including 12 in outsourcing
Academic qualifications	O-levels (UK school-leaving certificate)
First job	With a travel agency group
Mentors	'I observe and learn from the many people around me. I've tried to emulate the best, and ensure I don't ever repeat the worst. You can learn from everyone and from everyday events.'
Best management decision	Undoubtedly starting up this business
Worst management decision	IDCS made the mistake of initially taking on well-known clients who offered no room for growth, which was rectified quickly in the first year
Most embarrassing career moment	When a particularly difficult customer had finally signed on, a delighted Ravenall forwarded an e-mail to all and sundry without reading all of it. 'The rest is left to your imagination!'
Time-out activities	Playing the saxophone, diving, and playing nursemaid to abused dogs she rescues from the SPCA
Favourite toy	Her dogs. Although she owns a Porsche, possessions don't rate highly with her.
Family situation	Single. An English national, her mother lives in Bedfordshire, but her sister joined her in South Africa several years ago.
Retirement destination	Her philosophy is to live life to the fullest. 'Life's too short to keep all those dreams for when you retire -- rather live them now.'



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## Dynamism and an iron will

Eamonn Ryan

### Management style and qualities

Ravenall is the founder and entrepreneur behind IDCS, a company that provides outsource operational implementation solutions. When Ravenall describes some of her own strengths as dynamism and an iron will, somehow you don't doubt that what she says is true. This highly charged, fast-talking and shrewd businesswoman exudes a will for action. One could scarcely imagine Ravenall in another line of work – IDCS appears to be an extension of her personality.

But as a business person, she is astute enough to realise that entrepreneurs may be good at developing a business idea, but not necessarily always good at running the business. Where Ravenall differs from most others is in her will to succeed. Add to that a frank understanding of her strengths and weaknesses, complemented by the fact that she has both the ability to conceptualise an idea and then play out the operations of that idea, and you realise she has both feet firmly on the ground.

Much of her management focus is on empowering her staff. She creates a tough and competitive environment in which staff can take calculated risks without fear of failure, because she recognises that successful businesses create environments where people can harness their learning potential.

'Entrepreneurs need to have the ability to face their fears. This frees me to experiment

Suzanne Ravenall, Chief executive officer 163



with new ideas. I believe I have survival skills and so do many of our employees. They've had to learn to stand on their own two feet and carve out a career for themselves.'

She believes that too many people have ability, but lack the will to succeed. 'When making

recruitment decisions, I look for hunger, operational ability and a will and passion to succeed,' she says.

Although others would describe her management style as democratic, Ravenall sees herself as both an autocrat and a democrat. She says every

## COMPANY PROFILE

## IDCS

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## Physical address

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Sandton 2056

## Postal address

PO Box 99  
Rivonia 2128

## Type of business

Outsource operational  
implementation  
solutions provider

## Competitive business environment

IDCS calls itself an 'operational implementation company dealing in predictable outcomes'. In simple terms, it is a company that implements, plans and delivers operational efficiency to other companies, and manages these operations on an outsource/co-source basis.

IDCS provides operational services within the following five areas: field services, back-office administration, training services, human resources and labour broking. Though critical to their efficiency, companies often consider these areas non-core issues. IDCS offers its clients access to complex systems and infrastructure that would otherwise have been beyond their resources or expertise.

Although there are niche operators in each of the five areas in which IDCS works, the concept of 'operational outsourcing' of any one of these functions to a single firm is still relatively new. IDCS thus has no direct competitors.

IDCS operates on the premise that there is rarely a shortage of new ideas in the business world, but that companies are often not successful at implementing these.

'Up to 98% of people recruited in organisations are recruited for their technical managerial skills. This means that only about 2% of people in organisations have the ability to operationally implement new ideas. IDCS provides its services within this 2%.

'Ten years ago, out of, say, 20 plans presented to a board of directors, perhaps only a quarter were actually implemented, and usually time was flexible. Today, out of 100 plans presented, pressures exist to implement and execute 90 of them, all within a limited time-frame while ensuring that the correct processes, systems, measures and outcomes are in place. This puts tremendous pressure on an organisation.'

Ravenall says the client company hands a desired outcome to IDCS and the company implements it on an outsourced basis. In each of IDCS' five core areas it has developed an operations toolkit, which it unpacks in each company, says Ravenall, 'because operations in these functions in all companies are generally the same and only a small portion requires a tailor-made approach'.

At the core of IDCS' model is a strong IT base from which it can computerise and automate the processes within its client companies. The end-to-end nature of IDCS' solutions includes such activities as training staff and writing product development manuals for them, as well as getting these approved by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) in terms of the National Qualifications Framework. Even the examination process is automated.

good management style is a mixture of both. 'With too much democracy, things don't always get done. Tough decisions sometimes need to be taken quickly, and the team needs to focus on implementation.'

Ravenall puts her stamp on the company's values and corporate personality. Honesty and integrity are non-negotiable and, she says, these are not glib phrases, but something IDCS can prove to clients. For instance, the company charges a fixed amount for implementing a contract and a management fee for its services. If IDCS can provide the service for less than the contract cost, it reimburses the client with the difference.

'Clients often cannot believe this,' she says. Such service ethic is almost unheard-of. It is accepted that service providers attribute the difference to their own efficiency and take the difference as profit. IDCS, by contrast, views the contract cost as the client's money.

It is rare to have both strategic and operational implementation capacities in an individual or company. In fact, it was in recognition of this that Ravenall established IDCS, to provide the link between strategy and business results.

'I'm lucky,' says Ravenall, 'I have the ability to conceptualise, think through an idea and then hang the idea and the implementation together.'

IDCS is constantly re-engineering its processes through implementing a Total Quality Management (TQM) system that encourages continuous improvement and provides for decisions to be taken from the bottom up.

She encourages team members to come up

with new ideas. 'Teams are left to make the decisions themselves, within a set of well thought-through parameters.'

## Reasons for excellence

IDCS is uniquely placed in the market to provide total, end-to-end implementation solutions. Many companies employ strategists or business consultants, but place little emphasis on the execution of the objective or strategy designed by these consultants. IDCS picks up on the required outcomes of the objective or strategy and delivers it to the client.

Ravenall says IDCS has the unique capacity to implement the 'whole picture', and not just the basics. 'We take over the operational pains, provide a solution, and then implement and manage it.'

**'When making recruitment decisions, I look for hunger, operational ability and a will and passion to succeed.'**

Ravenall created the IDCS business model based on years of experience in Europe. The IDCS

model is built on robust IT systems, processes and methodology. New clients do not necessarily equate to new overheads, they simply get plugged into the system.

IDCS also caters for fast-growing companies that often fail to document systems and processes. 'We have an in-house design capability, which constantly adds to our operations toolkit. We have processes, systems and infrastructure in place that allow the rapid and smooth deployment of operational implementation.'

## Looking forward

The company has grown dramatically over the past three years and Ravenall expects it to double in size again over the next twelve months.



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She anticipates the growth to come from a changed perception of the outsourcing of operational implementation.

'Operational implementation is not unique, but the methodology we use is,' she says, 'and IDCS is already experiencing strong organic growth because of this.'

Currently forging international links with like-minded companies to offer a global service, she

wants to branch out into three or four English-speaking countries, with the United Kingdom and Australia at the top of the list. Once the company has reached critical mass, the potential exists for a listing on the JSE. 'Who knows,' says Ravenall. 'Listing is very much part of our plan, but there are only a few good reasons for listing a company. If the reasons are right, then it's all about timing.'

## COMPANY PROFILE

Says Ravenall, 'An important part of our business is managing the flow of data. When we sign up a new client, we collate as much data as possible and ensure that this information remains up-to-date and readily available.'

According to Ravenall, every organisation should be looking for growth, but should also devote as much time to making the current business sustainable. 'Although this sounds like pretty obvious advice, it is something all executives should be reminded of occasionally,' believes Ravenall. 'The basics are, however, boring, whereas new projects, ideas and innovations create excitement'.

There is no shortage of fantastic ideas and new concepts, and equally, there is no shortage of managers who are eager to implement these ideas in companies that are already taking strain with new projects, products and initiatives.

Operational excellence around implementation definitely provides a competitive advantage to all organisations. 'We believe that companies would be better off if they didn't jump into the latest management fad, which sometimes tends to over-complicate business. Our advice is to use an operational toolkit that features less tools that work effectively, rather than too many tools that don't.'

#### Local and international challenges

Although IDCS is unique in its offering, additional factors that make IDCS stand out are its employment of TQM processes underpinned by a strong IT infrastructure. IDCS has been awarded the BSI ISO 9002 accreditation for quality. This ensures that it is able to meet clients' strategic management objectives.

IDCS initially focused on marketing the individual areas in which it operates, to overcome people's lack of understanding and knowledge of the concept of 'operational implementation', but Ravenall believes that the South African market has now matured to the extent that the company can now market itself appropriately.

As a relative newcomer, IDCS has been fully absorbed in managing strong growth in its domestic business and is only now developing international links. Ravenall says a foreign presence will become a reality within the next two years. 'There are some exciting international companies that have an excellent match with our own business model.'

