

Shrugging off doubts

ThoughtWare's Sonja Bernhardt, one of Australia's highest profile females in IT, recently launched new compliance software that solves a lot of paperwork issues in fields such as aged care. By **Nicola Card**



ThoughtWare's Sonja Bernhardt believes a true entrepreneur is one who gets up one more time than they get knocked down.

ANYONE WHO HAS failed a tertiary course can take heart from Sonja Bernhardt who bombed out in computer studies yet is the first Australian inducted into the Hall of Fame for Women in Technology International, and is the CEO of Gold Coast based software development company, ThoughtWare.

The company was originally founded as a specialist project management and consulting services business — with clients such as the Queensland and Federal governments, Brisbane City Council and others. But Bernhardt and her co-director and husband Dr Robin Craig made the bold decision, three years ago, to forgo the strong growth and comfortable annual revenues of around half a million dollars, and instead reinvent the company.

Marking the start of the R&D phase into new governance, risk management and compliance software meant that staff was reduced from 25 to five. Development actually took several months longer than anticipated and the first launch proved somewhat premature.

They released their new software — known as 'i.on my software' — to their first client "but soon realised we needed to apply another 18 months' trials and tests to simplify user operations," said Bernhardt.

"At that stage I had already invested more than \$1.5 million in personal funds to develop the i.on my software and we had to come up with innovative ways to manage financial requirements and sustain a business along the way. In this case we worked closely with our client."

"It's not till you target an audience that touches and uses programs that you discover impracticalities or complexities. I guess the lesson here is make sure you sign up a partnership during pilot tests so you have some revenue while ironing out the bugs," she remarked.

"Now we are emerging from the three-year testing phase and madly commercialising our i.on my suite of products — well, one product, different skins: i.on my business for SMEs, i.on my centre for child care, i.on my school for schools and i.on my practice for doctor, dentist, lawyers, accountants, architects and other consultants."

Attracting by far the biggest interest is i.on my care for aged care. "It looks like our solution for the aged care market space is about to take off," Bernhardt said. "The pain felt by the aged care sector is significant. The market has use for the ►

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program and our system is the only one currently on the market offering solution on governance, risk management, compliance and accreditation.”

“These days aged care organisations are often buried in paperwork and overburdened with rules and regulations. That steals their time from being able to do what they really want to do, that is, care for our elderly. Our i.on my care solution helps lift those burdens and give them back time.

“Currently half of i.on my sales are into the aged care sector but it's going to be a swift ascent to 70 per cent. We assumed the child care sector would be the busiest, but it's far more price sensitive and less technologically literate,” she revealed.

Meanwhile the software helps micro businesses through to large enterprises interpret regulations, standards, contracts, trading agreements and policies; understand and document policies, processes and controls; monitor for compliance and changes over time and report as required.

“We took a huge drop in revenue (to develop the software) but are now past crisis

point and anticipate we will grow into a \$10 million business over the next two years doing business here in Australia and via partners in New Zealand, the UK and USA.”

A two-pronged approach to marketing into New Zealand, UK and US is under way in part through Bernhardt's global-wide circle of acquaintances. Contacts have already identified potential clients in Malta and Serbia.

The version for schools in Australia is likely to take off courtesy of a conference partnership with the prestigious King's School in Sydney. “We gave them a good rate but wanted them to stand up as case study. This gives us the opportunity to showcase our software to a wider group,” Bernhardt said.

“But all up it's much harder to commercialise than you think. It takes more time, money and effort than you ever plan, but will be worth it. What we are not doing is paid advertising, the market is shifting and it doesn't always work. We're instead building knowledge and campaigns in the market through shows, events and articles. Using our permission-based data base, e-

marketing demonstrations are our biggest approach.”

The size of ThoughtWare operations belies the string of home offices in which staff are connected and communicating via internet tools, communication via web cam, skype and VOIP phones. “We are flexible but can only do this because we are small. I want a genuinely flexible way of life.”

The preference stems from years as a single mother of two, juggling post graduate studies, and consulting for technology companies. Ironically Bernhardt failed computer studies but took up psychology and majored in abstract algebra. She's since gained an MBA and Graduate Diploma in Human Resource Management. And added daughter Kira, now aged five, to the family.

Bernhardt holds a string of board and executive positions locally, nationally and internationally, among them membership of Federal ICT Summit Advisory Group, the Queensland Government Communication and Information Advisory Board (CIAB), the Federal Government auDA (australian dot au domain) Competition Advisory Panel; she's Foundation member of GIDGITS (Girls Into Doing Great Information Technology Society) and immediate past member of the Australian Institute of Company Directors. ●

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