

JUNIA FREITAS: NURTURING AN INNOVATIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT

By Mary Ann Gratton

A global perspective comes naturally to **Junia Freitas** (MBA '96). Originally from Brazil, the director of Global Business Operations (Cisco) at Celestica has worked in Canada and Brazil, trekked across Spain, and pursued post-secondary education on three continents.

In her current position, Junia is responsible for Cisco's global operations at Celestica, a leading manufacturer of electronic components for the telecommunications and computer industries. Cisco, an Internet equipment provider, is one of Celestica's biggest customers. She describes her role as a "bridge" between customers and her colleagues at sites in Canada, Mexico, Italy, Thailand, California, and New Hampshire.

The third of four children growing up in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, Junia speaks Portuguese, French, Spanish and English, along with a smattering of Italian. She earned her Bachelor of Computer Science at her hometown university before working as a systems analyst at IBM Brazil. She then moved to IBM Canada/Celestica in Toronto. While working, she began her MBA part-time at Rotman, studied in France for one semester, and returned to Canada to finish her MBA on a part-time basis while continuing to work.

Junia has progressed up the ranks of Celestica over 13 years, from programmer analyst to her current role. She returned to Brazil in 1999 to launch a new Celestica operation, literally from the ground up. As director of manufacturing operations, she was the first employee on site, and when she returned to Canada last September, Celestica Brazil had grown to 1,000 employees.

Junia says creativity and innovation will flourish in an environment with strong leadership that fosters self-esteem, allows people to take risks, and encourages questions. "If people are allowed to be curious and imaginative and to ask questions, they can do wonderful things for a company."

"Creativity comes naturally to human beings," she says. "Children are inherently creative. They imagine things because they don't know otherwise. They ask 'Why is the sky blue?' and instinctively they are also asking 'Why not?' – for children, anything is possible. Adults sometimes stop asking questions, and we don't even realize we have stopped."

Asking questions served Junia well when she was first promoted into management in 1997. She took an unpopular job, supervising a night shift department of 73 employees. "At first, I felt I did not have a lot of value to add, but I sat down and asked people to tell me about their jobs. I listened a lot, and they told me what they thought should be done, and



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we worked together to solve problems. That process created a lot of trust." When the annual employee survey was later released, job satisfaction in that department rose from 33 per cent to more than 80 per cent.

Imagination, flexibility and curiosity among employees are all vital to a company's success, she says. "Companies that don't have some way to channel the creativity of employees will fall behind those that do. At Celestica, we have created some jobs that are strictly about developing ideas to solve customers' problems or develop new work processes without focusing on costs or profitability. These people are brilliant. Not all of their ideas are implemented, but many are, and have resulted in numerous patents and industry firsts."

Fostering creativity does not mean ignoring financial realities, she cautions. "Innovation is about creating something that did not previously exist, or creating the unexpected," she says. "However, customers don't like surprises. The challenge is to innovate and simultaneously manage realistic expectations."

Good communication also nurtures an innovative work environment, she adds. "Information changes daily, so one big challenge is to keep everyone up to speed with the same information at our sites around the world. Good communication has many benefits, and people can learn about a practice at our Thailand site, for instance, that might also work at the California site."

Junia will resume her travels in May when she heads home to Brazil for her wedding. She and her Canadian fiancé, Greg Manbeck, will take a short vacation in Brazil following the wedding and a longer, official honeymoon trip to Rome in the fall. "I've always wanted to go to Rome, and had the chance to go before, but I've been saving Rome for my honeymoon." **RM**

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