

MEET AN ICCA MEMBER

ICCA interviewed John Avellanet, Managing Director and co-founder of Cerulean Associates LLC, an IT Management and Regulatory Compliance consultancy and new member of ICCA.

ICCA: So, tell us why you went into consulting?

John: Well, after I'd overseen the merger of the company where I was CIO, I was offered a position with the new owner, yet I realized I wanted to do something more. I'd had the incredible fortune of working with a group of really talented folks, and had struggled through a lot of thorny issues in the medical device design field, in the regulated IT field and had even developed an ISO compliant records management program. So, a position in the IT hierarchy of an established company somehow just didn't fit with where I envisioned my career going. In the meantime, I'd learned a lot, mastered an intense amount of regulatory compliance rules and practices, and even received a couple of invites to speak at conferences. The more I spoke with colleagues around the globe, the more they urged me to become a consultant.

ICCA: So is that how Cerulean Associates came about?

John: Indirectly, yes. Some folks encouraged me to take a job with one of the big firms like Booz Allen or IBM while others said to give it a try alone first. I interviewed and received offers, but the latter option still appealed the most even though I hadn't saved a year's worth of salary so soon after the merger. Thus the first task was to write a reasonable business plan and find partners who would help fund it - and actually one of my partners pushed for the compliance focus.

ICCA: So what consulting field did you choose?

John: I focus more on the strategy and advisory side of FDA computer regulations. A previous client put it this way: when you go to an accountant, they focus on the work of the taxes and the accounting. Yet, that won't let you plan for retirement, balance your investment portfolio, learn budgeting skills, deal with debt, etc. For that, you need a Financial Advisor, same thing in the regulatory arena. So many consultants and firms focus on the work of validation, procedures, training and auditing; I've not found one yet that takes an independent, objective, big picture view and helps companies figure out what to validate, what not to, why, what their options are, how to sustain compliance cost-effectively, and so forth. Many years ago, I was introduced as the "anti-IT IT guy" so now, I guess, I'm sort

of the "anti-consultant consultant."

ICCA: Did you come to this approach on your own?

John: I'd say I was really influenced by several mentors, some long-time colleagues and friends, and by the works of Peter Block, Stephen Covey and Peter Drucker.

ICCA: Not your typical IT industry authors!

John: Yes, and I should tell you, I'm a big fan of Nick Carr's "IT is a commodity" philosophy.

ICCA: And why is that?

John: Well, in his original article, he makes the case that technology is no longer a true competitive advantage in the 21st century economy. Technology is too commonplace, too readily available to anyone and everyone. Certainly his theory underlies Thomas Freidman's "flat world" which has definitely been my experience. There's no technology today that will let you dominate your industry or gain a competitive advantage long enough to make a true profit on the investment. The key now, I think, is accepting Carr and Friedman's arguments and then building toward Block's "stewardship" ideal.

ICCA: Not quite sure what you mean?

John: Look, if I know that technology isn't going to give me a competitive advantage in and of itself, and I accept its ubiquity - everyone has a website, web conferencing, e-mail, etc. - if I accept those two things, then what am I left with to compete on? Of course, quality and service!

So, that's pretty much the key for Cerulean Associates - a high degree of personal service and quality (which includes things like innovation, creativity, plain talk, and so on). I see no point in competing in price which is why I publish our pricing; someone will always be less and someone will always be more, so why bother competing on it. It is what it is. I want my potential clients to make good decisions for themselves, and part of the information they need is the cost for the level of service, quality and advice they'll get.

ICCA: Thus getting back to the Financial Advisor-type role, right?

John: Bingo. And thus our slogan, "develop your potential." ☐



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Cerulean Associates LLC