

JOHN W. THOMPSON

ORAL HISTORY

COMPUTERWORLD HONORS PROGRAM
INTERNATIONAL ARCHIVES

Transcript of a Video History Interview with
John W. Thompson
Chairman & Chief Executive Officer
Symantec

Recipient of the 2007 Morgan Stanley Leadership Award for
Global Commerce

Interviewer: Ron Milton (RM)
Chairman, Board of Trustees,
Computerworld Information Technology
Awards Foundation

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Ron Milton: Today is Friday, April 13, 2007 and we're interviewing John Thompson, Chairman & CEO of Symantec Corporation.

John Thompson is the 2007 recipient of the Morgan Stanley Information Technology Leadership Award for Global Commerce.

The interview is taking place at Symantec's global headquarters in Cupertino, California, and is made possible by Morgan Stanley and the Computerworld Honors Program. The interviewer is Ron Milton, Chairman of the Board of Trustees for the Computerworld Information Technology Awards Foundation.

The Honors program was established in 1988 to seek out, honor, and preserve the history of the global information technology revolution. It was founded by Patrick McGovern of International Data Group, Roger Kennedy of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, and the Chairmen of forty of the world's leading information technology companies. It is now the world's largest IT awards program.

This oral history is being recorded for distribution to more than 220 national archives, museums, universities and research institutions in more than fifty countries on six continents around the world, and for the program's archives on-line.

Without objection, the complete video, audio and transcripts of this interview will become part of these international scholarly research collections and made available to the public on the web.

This discussion, however, is private and should any participant wish to withhold from the public record any part of these sessions, this request will be honored. All present here are honor-bound to respect this, and by remaining here, they accept the personal, professional and legal responsibility to abide by this agreement.

With no objections being heard, we will proceed.

Ron Milton: Let's begin with your beginning John, when and where were you born?

John Thompson: I was born April 24th, 1949, In Fort Dix, New Jersey. I was an Army brat.

RM: Tell us a little about your parents.

JT: My father spent eleven or twelve years in the military and then returned to West Palm Beach, Florida, where he had grown up and became a postman. So his government service extended beyond his military career.

My mother was a schoolteacher raised in a little country community in Grady County Georgia, and migrated to West Palm to live with her family after her parents had passed away. So she and my Dad met obviously, in West Palm, when she was a young girl.

RM: Was it hard having a schoolteacher for a mother?

JT: Well let's just put it this way. I didn't get away with anything that's for sure, because I could remember the boys' counselor in my high school had this direct line into my Mom's office, or at least it seemed like it. So anytime I did anything that was even slightly or remotely out of line, she knew about it even before I got home.

But I think the pragmatics were that, it was a nurturing environment, and the fact that my mother was a schoolteacher certainly did suggest to others in the school system that I might have a little bit of talent and interest.

RM: What about studying? She must have gotten on you about studying all the time.

JT: Actually not. My sister who is 22 months older than I am was truly the scholar, and I was determined to be something different than Brenda. So my Mom and Dad did not push me. They knew that there was enough raw capability there that someday I would wake up and realize that I could do more than skateboard, or ride a bicycle, or throw a newspaper, whatever it was that I was doing at the time.

RM: A little bit of competition in the family?

JT: A little it, but not a lot. Quite frankly I admired Brenda because she was determined that she wanted to be the valedictorian of her high school class, and she was. And I was determined that I didn't want to be, and I was successful too. (laughter)

RM: So talk a little about your family life, and I guess, what you just said, the impact on the person you are today from that upbringing.

JT: Well, my mother and father were wonderful people. My Dad's still alive, and I get to see him three or four times a year. But for us, it was about integrity. It was about applying yourself. It was about being caring with each other and others in the community.

I can remember an event that was held in recognition of my Mom about 10 years ago, where one of the people who introduced me spent more time talking about my Mom and how she cared for everyone in the community. It was that kind of family life that was important I think.

RM: So strong family values?

JT: Oh very much so, very much so.

RM: So the family moved from Fort Dix to West Palm. How old were you when the family moved?

JT: Well, candidly I don't remember. I don't remember Fort Dix, New Jersey. It's on my birth certificate, but as a child I only remember West Palm Beach.

I think what happened was, my Dad was going to be stationed overseas, and shortly after I was born, my Mom and sister moved back to West Palm Beach while he was off to the Azores Islands, or somewhere. And as a result my upbringing for all intents and purposes was done at West Palm. Notice I said “West Palm,” not Palm Beach.

RM: Think back to yourself as a boy, did you have role models, heroes, and if so, why?

JT: Mom and Dad were the best role models for me. They were always kind of the rock in our family, and told us what was right or wrong, told us how we should focus our energies and time. And one of the things I think candidly is missing a bit today in some families is just that sense of family unity.

So I didn't have these wonderful external role models if you will, until perhaps later in life when I had business aspirations, and I could look at people and their jobs or professions and say, gee there's something about the way he or she does that that I would like to do. But as a young boy, I guess my best role model was my Mom or my Dad.

RM: What was your first paying job?

JT: Let's see, I think the first paid job was the lady down the street paid me five dollars to cut her lawn once, and I realized, holy smokes, if my Dad won't charge me too much to rent the lawn mower I might be able to make a little bit of money at this. And I would then roll the lawn mower through the neighborhood to see how many people could be persuaded by this young guy, that I could cut their lawn and do a decent job.

Shortly after that I got a paper route. And shortly after that, the first job where I had an hourly check was, if you can believe this, in the local ice house, where a buddy of mine and I would bag ice to go into these local 7-11 stores, or convenience stores, for people to buy for the weekend, or whatever. I think I made a buck twenty-five an hour or something like that.

RM: Were these early signs that you were going to be an entrepreneur?

JT: Well I don't know that you could ever classify me or qualify me as an entrepreneur. I came out of undergraduate school. I joined IBM. And I learned the disciplined approach of a large corporate environment, like IBM. From there I arrived at Symantec. So there isn't necessarily an entrepreneurial experience in my background. It's more about professional management and professional leadership, as opposed to entrepreneurial leadership.

I think there is a certain desire that one has to have to create and innovate if you're going to be an effective leader, whether you call that entrepreneurship or not, is up to you. But I think it is all about what leadership is. And leadership is about creating something different; getting people excited about what the possibilities are and moving ahead on those ideas.

RM: Were there early signs of your interest in technology or sciences?

JT: Ironically enough, as a junior and senior in college, I joined a group of guys who owned a stereo store. And back then, holy smokes, it was a long time ago, component stereo equipment was the rage. And I decided, gee, I could sell that. And I became interested more in the technology from that aspect than computers and programming.

I took one course in Computer Science as a graduate, and I thought, boy is this boring. The interest for me in the technology field was in selling the technology, because I always wanted to be a salesman. I always wanted to be a businessperson, and I eventually concluded that the fastest path to great riches was going to be through sales, and since technology was hot back in the late 60s, early 70s, if you could marry technology and selling together, who knows, you might be able to create a pretty good career.

RM: Where did you go to college, and how did you choose your first major?

JT: I attended Florida A&M University in Tallahassee, Florida. I initially had gone to school in Missouri, a little school called Lincoln University, on a music scholarship. I concluded that I was neither dedicated enough, or interested enough in the profession of music to teach or play professionally, and so the alternative was, why not be a businessman? In my little community, the local businessman owned the grocery store, or the dry cleaner or the barbershop, and those were the people that seemed to have the nicest homes, and the biggest cars and all of that, and I thought, this is for me!

What it meant I didn't quite know. In other words I didn't know how it would translate for me in my life, but ultimately, the role of business was really, really important. So at Florida A&M I majored in Business Administration. I left there and joined IBM, and the rest is sort of history in my career.

RM: Is there any one professor that expressed an interest in you and turned you toward IBM?

JT: Well there was one fabulous, fabulous lady at Florida A&M. Her name was Sybil Mobley. She was up until just about two years ago, the Dean of the School of Business and Entrepreneurship at Florida A&M, and is probably one of the most respected Black academicians in the country. And because Sybil knew people in my family - she knew my mother, and knew my in-laws and what have you - she took a personal interest in me. And I don't know that she pushed me necessarily, but I know that she would every now and then say, "You're not doing as well as you could do!" And I suspect that helped a bit.

RM: In 1983, you get a Masters in Management Science from MIT, Sloan School of management. Was that part of your fast track plan to top management?

JT: Well it was a surprising call for me the day that my boss Paul Palmer called me and said, "John why don't you come up? You and I need to have a conversation." And I was like, "Okay, what did I do wrong?"

So I wandered up to Paul's office and he says, "I've got two things for you; first of which is, your branch has been selected the top branch in the country." which was just amazing. It was a wonderful accomplishment for the team. But then second, "John Opel, who is the CEO of IBM, has decided you should go to Sloan School." And I was like, "I should do what?" He said, "Yes, you should go to Sloan School where you'll get a masters, and so on. And I'm like, "I don't want to do that." And he said, "Well, why not?" And I said, "I kind of like what I'm doing now." And he says, "No, no, no, believe me, this is a good thing for you."

And so sure enough, I acquiesced if you will, and did take the year off to go back to Sloan School. It was a wonderful, wonderful experience. I was with 54 other mid-career managers, as we were called, who got this complete immersion experience, where for, gee 11 and a half months, that's all you did. So my job everyday, as paid by IBM, was to get up and got to school and learn. So it was something that candidly I will never forget, and I'm very thankful that IBM was willing to do that.

At that point I didn't really understand why I was doing this, because the IBM process was so structured and so disciplined in terms of what you would learn and how they did things. I couldn't quite understand why they wanted me to go do this. I think the reality was that it gives you great context for how various business decisions and issues can be approached or made. And while there is certainly an IBM way, there is also traditional way in which people might think about analytically based problem solving, and that's clearly the way IBM and MIT approach problem-solving.

RM: What are some of your greatest successes at IBM?

JT: I don't know; 27-years, 9-months and 13 days, survival perhaps. I had a wonderful career, and the thing about my IBM career was that over the span of 28 years it was so diverse. I got to do lots of different things. I got to work in finance. I got to sit at the right hand of the Vice Chairman of the Board for a period of time as his assistant. I got to work in Sales and Marketing. I got to work in Engineering. And so I think the diversity of the experiences that I had there would clearly be the hallmark of what I would call a successful IBM career.

But I can't point to any one thing that I did that I said, "Gee I'm so proud of that. I'm more proud of that than anything else," because the teams that I worked with, we accomplished a lot and I think it set me up to have a great career there.

RM: Were there challenges that you dealt with that had a meaningful part of your career later on?

JT: I think all people are shaped by the experiences that you have. Clearly the early 90s for IBM were very, very trying times. I can remember going into the mid-west operation to run it as its General Manager. On day one, I had 9-thousand people. Three-and-a-half years later, I had 41-hundred people, and the revenue target hadn't changed. So the whole dynamic of dealing with right-sizing a business, and getting a business more focused on how it was going to execute in a more competitive market, I would have to say for all of us who lived through that period of time, it was very shaping.

RM: I want to take you now to present-day Symantec, or at least the last number of years, this decade, so many acquisitions in the early days at Symantec, how were these the right moves for a growing Symantec under your leadership?

JT: Symantec has been an acquisitive company forever. Long before I arrived here my predecessors used acquisitions as part of their growth strategy. For us, our focus has been more narrow. Rather than focusing on titles that can be distributed through the channel, it was technologies that we could integrate more tightly to solve a specific business or technology problem for a customer, hence, security.

As we learned more about the security markets we became more aware of the fact that it was about managing the process of security, not the security technologies themselves. And that led us to a different set of acquisitions. So along the way we probably have done 30 or 35 transactions, all of which have not worked. I will be the first to admit that. But enough of them have worked that we have emerged as the fourth-largest independent software company in the world.

RM: Veritas being the biggest acquisition?

JT: Yes.

RM: Looking back are you pleased with that decision and the stage you are at now with them?

JT: Clearly the decision was the right one for our company. The execution has not been as good as I would have liked. But strategically it was about taking security technologies and moving them closer and closer and closer to where information or data is being managed, or making sure that the knowledge of security exposures or vulnerabilities are thought through in the systems environment that large enterprises are using. And I think strategically those thoughts are still spot on. We have got to pick up our execution a little bit, but on the main I'm quite satisfied.

RM: What do you see as your biggest successes at Symantec?

JT: Oh, I don't know. I think when my tombstone is finally etched, they'll probably say that he took a sleepy little consumer oriented software company and made it relevant, not just to consumers, but corporate users alike. And I think that is indicative of where the markets are going.

If you think about where the markets are going, if you think about any company today, what it's trying to figure out is, how can I open my electronic doors to more and more customers, and let customers into my environment, as opposed to just my employees and business partners? And I think this marriage of our consumer business and our corporate focus, is very much supportive of how large corporate users have to think about technology today. And hopefully when the tombstone is finally etched, it will say that were able to demonstrate the real value of linking consumers into a corporate world in a way that is seamless, in a way that that is secure, and delivers a level of confidence that consumers have to have.

RM: My chairman has a favorite saying, "The biggest room in the world is the room for improvement." Is there room in the Thompson legacy for improvement?

JT: Well, everyday we could do a better job of execution. I often am asked, what keeps you awake at night? And my answer is our ability to execute on the ideas that we have. And I think to the extent that we are effective at learning from our mistakes and cycling those learnings back into the next set of decisions that we make, I think we can become a better team.

The notion of continuous improvement or self-improvement is something that is somewhat foreign to the software business quite frankly. It's not foreign to manufacturing companies, technology companies that have a hardware manufacturer agenda. But I think in the software business we have to think a lot more about continuous improvement, and how we improve all parts of our business, not just innovating in our software, but innovating in our business processes that touch customers and partners every day.

RM: In a speech two years ago today, April 13, 2005, one of the things that struck me was that you were talking about the revolution happening in information technology, that has a vision towards a resilient infrastructure. Where do you think we are two years later in that in revolution?

JT: I think if you take a look at what's gone on around the world, regardless of whether you are a consumer or a corporate user, more digital content is being created every day. And with that comes a responsibility by the individual consumer or the corporate user to manage it effectively, to protect it, and to ensure that it has the integrity that you want it to have when it's used as part of a decision making process, or as it's shared with friends and family.

Who would want to distribute to a family member a photograph that has been defaced in some way? Perhaps it may be defaced in a way that is not particularly enhancing to your family relationships. I won't go any further than that, but that would be a horrible, horrible thing to do. So I think for us, our job here is about making this process of storing and managing and protecting digital content easier for every single person who is now adapted to a digital lifestyle. Very few of us live back in the analogue world of many, many years ago. We all live in a digital world, and we all want these assets that we've created to be shared and managed. And that's our job here.

RM: So at that time of your speech, two years ago today, you were in the middle of SEC approval for Veritas acquisition, and the company you were acquiring had the storage availability and capabilities that allowed you to somewhat verticalize, if you will, your view toward a resilient infrastructure, do you have the same thinking today?

JT: Well I think if you look at what companies like Morgan Stanley are trying to do is a case in point. They want to make sure that systems are always available. This notion of resiliency is real for them; any minute, any second of down time is a lost opportunity, is lost money. And so the concept of resiliency is alive and well everywhere we go.

Think about the connected experience for a consumer. If I am using my Blackjack, my Blackberry like device as I travel around the world, that's as important to me from its resiliency and its connectivity as the large main frame or Unix environment might be for some large corporate user. So this concept of resiliency, and always on, or always available is the world in which we live. And fortunately for Symantec, we are very well positioned to be able to help, either individual consumers, or very large corporate and government users create that sense of resiliency.

RM: So developing new products, sets of capabilities, the expression, "no risk, no reward," comes out. Tell me from your perspective what that means.

JT: Well, or, "no guts, no glory." Actually for us, every line of code we write has some risk associated with it, that it may not work. Or every acquisition that we do has the inherent risks that are associated with those things. So there is a notion around here that we have to be thoughtful about what investments we make. We have to be thoughtful about the code that we build. We need to test it thoroughly, because if you look at what goes on around the world, many of the largest commercial and government users in the world use our technologies to either keep their systems up and running, or to keep bad traffic and bad people out of their networks. And that responsibility we don't take lightly. It is a huge, huge obligation on our part, and fortunately our team rises to the occasion more often than not.

RM: I'm going to shift to a couple of questions about your views on leadership. If you will John, values and ethics that you pass on to your children and family, and to your employees at Symantec, tell us a little about that.

JT: Well, integrity is everything. It starts with and ends with and ends with that for me; that people have to know that you have a compass that drives you day in and day out, and that you don't stray from, if you will, that moral compass. For me, it's about doing what I say and saying what I do with a degree of integrity that is visible to everyone. I won't compromise that for anything. And I think as people see that and experience that, they know what kind of leader I want to be, and what kind of team we want to create here at Symantec.

RM: Those are great words, so I'm going to take you to something softer for a moment. As a wine lover I am curious, and just have to ask you a question about Bordeaux and barbeque.

JT: Well that was actually my good friend Doug Elix from IBM, whom I absolutely adore. He is a wonderful guy. We were at our home in Westport, Connecticut, this was many years ago, and we were having a barbeque to celebrate the work that a team had done for the two of us. And as we wound down the barbeque, I said to Doug, "How about a good bottle of wine?" And he says, "Sure." And I said, "Okay, go downstairs and open up the cellar and you can take out one bottle of anything that you want." And I should have known better, but Doug chose an '82 Bordeaux, and we had a wonderful evening, and it didn't stop with that first bottle of wine. We decided that if one went good with the barbeque, maybe two would as well. Doug's a great friend, and to be able to share that bottle of wine with him was a wonderful, wonderful memory.

RM: I thought you might mention Doug, and he said a few things about you over the years, and all complimentary of course.

JT: I fooled another one. (laughter)

RM: You fooled him a number of times by the look of the quotes. Doug had said about you John, that, "He has a way of making things simple. He has a clever and calm way of getting people to focus on the big picture and get everyone on board."

JT: Well those are kind words. I don't know. I think what you have to do as a leader is get people to see your view of the world. Get people not just to see it, but become excited about it. And it's not about complex, intergalactic things. It's about making concepts simple enough for everyone to embrace and to want to get on board.

There's a simple notion of the elevator pitch about what you're trying to do at your company, and heck, we only have a three floor building here so the pitch has got to be real short and real simple. And that concept works. That if you simplify what it is that you're trying to do to the point where people can understand it in a few short catchy phrases – not clever little phrases that rhyme or things like that - I'm no Jesse Jackson by any stretch of the imagination - but things that make people want to be a part of the team. That's what leadership's all about.

RM: Any one factor in your earlier life that you felt was very shaping for where you are today John?

JT: Early on when I joined IBM, I joined as a sales rep in Tampa, Florida. And there was an incident that occurred, because this was back in 1971, where an account that I called on was not sure they wanted to have me as their rep. The end result was that IBM said, "Well gee, if you don't want to do business with him, we don't want to do business with you." And ultimately that led to a different territory assignment for me, and a whole new set of experiences that probably came earlier in my IBM career than they might have otherwise had that incident not occurred. So I am forever somewhat grateful if you will, for this individual's perhaps biased view of the world and how it ultimately impacted my IBM career. It got my career launched on a faster pace quite frankly than it might have otherwise, because someone didn't understand the value of interacting with me, or our company.

RM: That must have been a point of pride in IBM as well in working with you and supporting you as part of the team.

JT: We had a great leadership team in Florida back many, many years ago. As a matter of fact one of the interesting things about my early days at IBM is that there was a colleague of mine whose name was Dave Thomas. Dave and I joined IBM essentially at the same time in Tampa, Florida, and we rose through the company together. At one point were members of the worldwide management council together, on and on and on. And it was somewhat rare that in a company of IBM's size that you had two guys that started essentially at the same time, in the same little branch office in Tampa, Florida, to reach a pretty good level within a company of that size.

RM: I'm going to take you back to Phoenix two years ago today at that Storage Networking World speech. You saw Anne Livermore, and another statement that you made struck me, and I quote you, "Information is the currency of our age, and as such it has become invaluable." How do you feel about that today, and in relation to what a CIO's challenge is, like you were describing Morgan Stanley before, what's the challenge?

JT: Well if you think about it, most businesses are more information intensive today than they are cash intensive. Now it's hard for us perhaps to grasp that, but the reality is, every business decision that gets made here and almost every company around the world, is influenced in some significant way by the insights that we glean from the information that we use to facilitate that process, and so it is in fact the new currency of the day.

Competitive strategies, success or failure in the market, is based more upon information, not just capital. And I think our company and its customers who take advantage of that concept are very, very well served in today's global market. Think about it. You can't compete anywhere in the world today without having intelligence and insight about what's going on in those markets, and how your company can adapt or adjust to the changing market conditions. And you can have all the riches in the world, but the absence of effective insight and intelligence about the market won't allow you to be successful.

RM: There are lots of books and conversations about information technology, but there's little about leadership in IT. What does leadership at the user level, the CIO level mean to you?

JT: Well I think the most effective CIOs today are the ones who are very well aligned with the overall goals of the business, and that IT is there to facilitate the business processes of the organization, not to perpetuate the technology and the technology infrastructure. And those who make sure that the technology infrastructure is aligned with the business strategy of the company, and therefore they're very application focused, are the ones who tended to do the best job, and are the most well respected in the industry. And there are lots of examples of that for sure.

RM: You mentioned innovation before in the context of entrepreneurship, where do you think innovation comes from?

JT: Well it comes from people being willing to take risk. People being willing to step out on the edge of conventional thinking; to say, gee there is a different way to pursue our goal, or a different way to think about this problem. And every innovative company has a process by which it allows its people to think differently. It does not punish them for their mistakes. It rewards them for their mistakes as long as it's not the same mistake repetitively. If that occurs that's just bad management. Fundamentally though, every company has to have an environment that encourages a degree of risk taking because it's only in that that you can create true innovative breakthroughs.

RM: What do you see as the traits and qualities of an innovator?

JT: Well, clearly someone who is willing to live on the edge, someone who's willing to admit that they made a mistake. It's a little bit like selling in my mind, where if you're a very good salesperson you've learned how to accept rejection. You've learned how to accept people saying no and pick yourself up and go back and try again and again and again. And while some might argue that that's not innovation, I would argue it is because innovation is about failure and learning from the mistakes that you've made, getting back up and getting back in the game. And the most innovative companies in this valley, the most innovative companies around the world, have as many failures if not more so, than they do successes.

RM: So at Symantec, you just had your major sales week of the year, in that context that you just gave us, how do you best encourage that innovation?

JT: For us, it's all about winning. I can remember a few weeks ago I was up in Toronto, Canada, and one of the questions that came from the audience was, "Gee John, are you having fun? How are you going to make sure that we are having fun at what we do?" I told him, "Look, my job is not to make sure that you have fun. My job is to help you win. And guess what? If we're winning, I bet we're having a whole boatload of fun."

RM: Jack Welch in his book entitled *Winning*, said, "Leaders make sure that people not only see the vision, they live and breathe it." How do you feel about that?

JT: I've been at this now for almost 8 years, and we started out with a real simple idea, that we would take our little company and turn it into something that was more relevant in a world where people were more and more connected. That simple little idea has expanded to what Symantec is today, and I couldn't be more proud of this team, and I'm pleased with my little role here. I liken myself however, to the drum major of a marching band. I went to Florida A&M as I told you, and they had one of the most world renowned bands in the Marching 100. They have two or three drum majors out front, but a 175 people in the band behind them. I tell people all the time, "Listen to and pay attention to the band, not the drum major, because that's where all the beautiful music is coming from."

RM: You just talked about innovation, are there innovators out there that you admire as role models?

JT: There are lots of people in this industry and around the world that are doing just remarkable, remarkable things. There are leaders in the technology industry that I admire for some of their traits or their strengths. I think the degree that customer focus and commitment that is embodied in John Chambers at Cisco is a wonderful thing. I think the competitive intensity that you see in Steve Ballmer at Microsoft is a marvel. I don't know how he keeps it up all the time but it is certainly is a marvel. I think the technical leadership that has been embodied in a guy like Bill Coleman who's built multiple companies that have really done great things in the industry, those are all things that you can look at and admire. There's no one person in my mind, but there are wonderful people out there who truly do inspire me.

RM: Is there any point where the term “innovate forever,” isn’t the first mantra?

JT: Historically, companies have always thought you grow or you die. And in the tech industry I think the mantra is more like you innovate or you die because you’re as good as the next great idea that your team is able to bring to the marketplace. Not bring out of the lab, but bring to the marketplace where it can in fact be a success. And I think there are great examples of companies in this industry that have been able to keep a steady stream of innovation going, and therefore keep a steady revenue growth and earnings profile growing as well. Hopefully Symantec will be one of those forever.

RM: Let me take you to another author who has good things to say, Geoff Moore, in his book *Dealing with Darwin*, from last year. He talked about learning from the past and transforming your internal dynamics to overcome the inertia that threatens every bold innovation. Is this applicable for you as a leader and for Symantec going forward?

JT: Well I think every leader has got to every now and then check his or her hold card that says, gee am I just doing things the old rote way that I have always done them? Am I really learning myself? Am I reinventing myself? And if the answer to those questions is no, it’s time for you to move on quite frankly. I argue that effective leaders certainly in the role of CEO, probably have a life cycle of about 8 to 10 years. And if they don’t reinvent themselves and reinvent the company in the process, boy they probably ought to move on because they’re not serving that company very well.

RM: Do you see information management as lying at the center of strategy and competitive advantage as a statement that’s out there? Do you agree with it?

Absolutely. I can’t think of any company today, any business organization, commercial or government that isn’t influenced significantly by their ability to share information. It’s becoming more important, not less so. And therefore it’s at the core of everything that those organizations do, from financial services to healthcare, to telecommunications to retail.

Think about the retail experience. Retailing has gotten far more targeted because they use information about what you bought. You go into Amazon today and you buy this book, and Amazon says that others who have bought this book also have been interested in these books. That’s information based, and they’re hopeful that by directing you toward what others have purchased, you too might purchase that. So the information intensity of our economy is driving higher and higher every day, and hopefully as a result of that, businesses are seeing more value in that information as well.

RM: John I’m going to take you back 20 years to a quote from Edwards Demming. He said, “It is not necessary to change. Survival is not mandatory.” How do you interpret that warning some 20 years later? What does it mean for today and the future?

JT: Well I don’t think any of us build businesses or organizations with an eye toward sun-setting them. We build these businesses with an eye toward them having some sustaining quality about them.

I'm on the board of UPS, and UPS this year is celebrating its 100th anniversary. My goodness, Symantec is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, and I know how challenging it has been to get us to 25 years. Think about the vision that Casey, the founder of UPS had to create an organization that can sustain itself for a hundred years. And I think that's about change. It's about adapting to changing market conditions, because what started out in their case is a little parcel delivery company in Seattle, Washington, to what now is a global facilitator of commerce. That is a markedly different view of the world than what they were a hundred years ago.

I think every organization has to think about that, that is, how am I making myself more relevant today to the problems that my customers and partners are dealing with today, that sustains the franchise? And if you can't come up with an effective answer to that, you will die.

RM: What will it take for Symantec to be that 100-year company?

JT: We have to be forever adaptable. We have to be willing to change with the changing market conditions and changing environment around us. Fortunately because of the security component in our business, we know that we have no choice but to change, because the threats change about every 18 months. But that's not quite the same as changing your business model, or changing your strategy to deal with changing market conditions. And I think if we are true to ourselves, and true to the needs of our customers, we will adapt and therefore the franchise can be sustained.

RM: John, a few questions about your philosophy going forward, your hopes, your desires in a visionary sense. What are your hopes for humankind in terms of what this IT revolution we live in can achieve?

JT: Well I hope right now that we can apply the learnings and knowledge of technology to deal with things like the global healthcare crisis, or the global warming crisis. These are two issues that are of paramount importance to mankind that we ought to do something about, and if anything technology can facilitate us solving those problems for sure. Boy if we did that, mankind can sustain itself for many more years to come.

RM: The President of the United States honored you with being involved in some of the most critical decisions in terms of the infrastructure going forward. How do you feel about that? What should we be doing more than we are doing now?

JT: First off it's quite an honor to be asked to serve, and I think any of us who is asked to serve our country should quickly and readily be willing to jump in. That was certainly the attitude I had when the opportunity came along.

If you think about the world in which we live, you cannot separate the digital infrastructure of our country from the physical infrastructure. So the roads, the water supply, the electric energy grid, all of those things are connected by the digital information that flows to make them effective. So the thought that we would bring together leaders from the physical and digital infrastructure of the country to think about what more can we do to protect it, that's a profound thought.

And I think over the last two or three years the group has done some really, really interesting work. I've been honored to be a part of it. Candidly many of the team members of Symantec, like Rob Clyde and others, have been very actively involved. They're the smart people. I'm just the drum major here kind of holding the baton.

RM: It's all about that band behind the drum major right?

JT: Right. That's right.

RM: So in that kind of a role where we're protecting the critical infrastructure of the United States, at the same time we're sort of restricting it globally. How do you feel about that?

JT: I think there are some parts of the world that certainly have restrictions on how you use this infrastructure, or what access you might be able to make to the infrastructure. But I think we're on a course where it's inevitable that information will flow freely around the world, even in countries like China where they would like to control where people go and what people see. Ultimately, the democracy in which we live around the world will force us to open up more and more and more and information technology, and information sharing will be at the core of creating bigger, broader democracies around the world.

RM: Are there obstacles in the future you see John? What are the greatest obstacles ahead, are they technical, social or something else?

JT: I don't think any of us 25 years ago would have ever envisioned a life influenced by technology like the ones that we live today, and I think we have to develop as a human being, a sixth sense about technology.

We have a sixth sense about the physical world in which we live. We know where we should and should not go. We know what we should and should not do, but I don't think we have that same sixth sense about technology. Simple case – people are duped into opening an email thinking that they had just won 500-dollars. Well we know that that's not likely. We know that when junk mail comes in our mailboxes we just throw it away. We're forever hopeful I guess in the technology world that perhaps that one lightning strike will occur and we will be the one to win the 500-dollars. Well there is a certain naiveté perhaps and we have to get over that. We have to learn or create that sixth sense in this digital world, and I think when we do, we'll have even more fun than we are having today.

RM: What is the message from your own words that you would like to leave for the global technology industry as far as the vendors go?

JT: I think we all owe our customers more than what we're giving them today. We have to think more holistically about the problems that they're trying to solve, and how our solutions must interoperate in their environment. While we've known for many, many years in this industry that profits follow architectural control, we also need to recognize that profits follow customer deployment and simplicity.

So if we do a better job of ensuring interoperability, open industry standards, complexity reduction, cost benefit analysis, I think we will see this industry continue to thrive for many, many years to come. But it starts with a willingness to embrace an open architecture, one that our customers are screaming for.

RM: And the message to that enterprise user-audience themselves?

JT: Keep pushing us. We are as good as the last request, and candidly I think we can do a lot more as an industry to serve your needs. But the most demanding customers are the ones who really, really do push the envelope on the use of technology, and push us as a vendor community to do a better job for them.

RM: How would John Thompson like to be remembered in this IT revolution?

JT: Just a country boy who wants to win, that's all.

RM: John thank you so much for this.

JT: My pleasure. My pleasure.