

Global provider of Collaborative, Enterprise Business Solutions, Highland Solutions is Automating Business Processes including Cloud Computing, eCommerce, and CRM Systems allowing Clients to be more Efficient, Productive and Competitive

**Business Services
Customer Relationship**

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**Jeffrey L. Nixon
COO**

BIO:

Mr. Nixon is a high-impact business leader with a strong record of achievements in highly competitive industries. He has a solid history of innovative leadership, continuous improvement, product development, managing leading-edge technology and delivering excellent products and services.

Prior to joining Highland Solutions as Chief Operating Officer, Mr. Nixon was the Vice President, General Manager U.S. Services at W.W. Grainger, Inc. In this capacity, Mr. Nixon was responsible for the development and deployment of for-fee services for both the GIS and Specialty Brands businesses. Previous to this role, Mr. Nixon was responsible for U.S. strategy and business development, including domestic M&A activity.

Prior to joining Grainger, he was the COO of Vision Point of Sale, a premier provider of point of sale products and services to the retail industry. Mr. Nixon has also held positions as the CEO of Gustafson Lighting and was the Vice President and General Manager of Grainger's Integrated Supply division. Mr. Nixon has held other positions of increasing responsibility within Grainger and SPX Corporation.

Jeff graduated from The Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University in 2003.

About Highland Solutions

Highland Solutions is a global provider of collaborative, enterprise business solutions at the nexus of business and client relationships. Through strategic technology partnerships, Highland Solutions has continuously evolved with the rapidly changing technology landscape. Their service offerings include custom development, cloud computing, systems integration, eCommerce, social business platforms and customer relationship management (CRM) systems.

**Interview conducted by:
Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor
CEOCFO Magazine**

CEOCFO: Mr. Nixon, what is the focus at Highland Solutions?

Mr. Nixon: We work with our clients on providing technical solutions to the business challenges they may face. We engage in a number of different activities from ecommerce and customer relationship management projects, to customized application development and web hosting. It is our responsibility to automate various business processes for our clients so that they are more efficient, more productive and more competitive in the marketplace.

CEOCFO: There are other companies that say they do just that. How do you do it better, cheaper, faster and easier and what is the focus at Highland that allows you to present an offering that may be superior?

Mr. Nixon: Unlike many other companies in our space, we do not go into the clients environments assuming we have the right solution. We start with the client and work to understand their environment and concerns. We collect what are called user stories. We try to understand intimately what business challenges they are faced with, whether it be within their industry, against their competitors or with their clients. We really try to assess their current situation from the client point of view and then begin to build a roadmap of solutions that can help our clients achieve their desired outcomes. This client-centric point of view carries through to our development process and to the point of which we deliver the solution to our

clients. We take as far as ensuring our clients have a great experience with our invoicing and billing processes too. Unlike many people in the technical world who go in to dazzle their customers with technical expertise, we try to build trust with them by uncovering the business problems and business solutions and then allow technology to be able to enable that. It's a very intimate approach.

CEOCFO: Often people think they know what is wrong but do not really understand. How do you draw out from the client the pieces of information you need to create an informed solution?

Mr. Nixon: That does start in those early conversations in trying to ask very thoughtful, inquisitive questions to our clients as to what their business is about and what they are faced with. Often times you are right, they do not know what the solutions is. That's why they are coming to us because they know they have a problem and they know that they have to fix that problem in order for them to be more competitive, productive and profitable, but need Highland's perspective to help solve this mystery. We use an agile development methodology at Highland to build our solutions for our clients. Agile allows us to ask very direct questions to get at the root cause of problems. We use a very collaborative and integrative process with our clients, which helps both us and the client understand what solutions we need to build for them. Unlike many companies in our space who take a list of client requirements down, go away for months at a time and then come back and say "OK, here it is", we actually develop in two-week sprints and those sprints are designed to go after specific client requirements that they have prioritized along with us. Through this process, our goal is to deliver value to our clients every two weeks. Delivering value means that we actually give them something back at the end of the two weeks they can actually begin to use and see value created in their business. They do not have to wait until the end of the project to see what we came up with, they are actually a part of our

process in helping us learn and iterate and create all along the way.

CEOCFO: How do clients find Highland Solutions?

Mr. Nixon: Typically they found us either through our channel partners, like IBM and SugarCRM, who have clients coming to them looking for the skills that we possess. And, up until recently, it's been by word of mouth and knowledge of who we are in the industry. We hope to change that by being more public about who we are, what we do and how we communicate the value that we create for our clients every day.

CEOCFO: What are some of the most common scenarios that you work with and maybe something that people would be surprised you are able to craft a solution for?

Mr. Nixon: Most of the time clients are coming to us because they have a particular process in-house that is either broken or they are doing it in a

"It is our responsibility to automate various business processes for our clients so that they are more efficient, more productive and more competitive in the marketplace."- Jeff Nixon

very manual way. It could be with Excel spreadsheets, Word documents, email or a number of what we would consider simple technological tools. In today's world, clients need to be able to do things bigger, better and faster. Usually, we work with our clients on complex business problems that have been in their environment for a long time and they have come to the point where now it has become a bottleneck to their growth and prosperity. I think what clients are most surprised about with us is that we do not come in day-one with an automatic answer to their problem. We actually listen to them and try to understand their business and try to become intimate with them because it's our goal to be a trusted advisor to our clients, not just to be the developer guys. What really surprises and delights our customers is that we come in and listen to them intently first and work with them on a solution. This as opposed to having a canned answer when we walk in the door. I think what also really surprises our clients is the level of intimacy

they get throughout the development process. We actually ask our clients, and in most cases require them, to have a vested interest in the development process because we think it actually adds to our creativity and insights that we use to develop products in an efficient and effective way. We also use an open architecture format so we make it easy to collaborate.

CEOCFO: Do your clients tend to come back to you to solve additional problems?

Mr. Nixon: They do. What is interesting is most of our clients start with a relatively simple problem and then they end up staying with us over the long-haul developing much more complex solutions for their businesses. This afternoon I was talking to a potential client which was a law firm. They called us because they want us to do a simple SugarCRM implementation. It is nothing more than contacts and basic profile information for their client. As we talked to them, they started to learn more about our capabilities and began to talk about future projects. They began to see the capabilities

and value-term that we create over the long-term. We do not want to be a shop that just goes project to project with a client, but is a trusted advisor that manages a portfolio of business issues that they have and create ongoing solutions for them.

CEOCFO: How do you find people to work for Highland that have both technical skills and people skills?

Mr. Nixon: Both technical skills and people skills are equally important. It's no longer acceptable in our business to be just technically adept. You also need to be able to relate to the client, to have a willingness to engage with the client and to become close to the client. We think there are four underlying principles in business in how we interact with clients. We have to be innovative, iterative, able to implement collaboratively and have the ability to be intimate with our clients. When you look at that as your baseline of expectation of how we go about doing what we do for our clients, you have to be both technically

adept as well as very comfortable having conversations with clients. Our clients expect that. It is interesting, when I talk to our clients they value the fact that we are close to them and their business. We are truthful and transparent with them and as a company we have a very high standard of trust and ethics. We want our team members to execute these values and, quite frankly, it is tough to find great people who fit all the parameters that we have. We are constantly looking for good people as our business has really grown dramatically over the last few years. We are finding it tough in the marketplace to find new "Highlanders", but it is not because they are not out there. It's because we are looking for a very specific set of skills that go beyond just the technical aspects of our business.

CEOCFO: What is your geographic reach?

Mr. Nixon: We have clients all across the US even though we are based here in the Midwest. They come from a variety of different businesses from large Fortune 500 companies to boutique companies that have relatively small business footprints but have big needs.

CEOCFO: Are there particular industries of focus or areas in which you would like a greater presence?

Mr. Nixon: We have a rich history in manufacturing, warehousing, transportation, as well as healthcare, financial services and insurance. Those are some of the areas that we tend to work quite heavily in either because of past experience or because of how the solutions we develop. Our clients typically have very complex business processes that have a great deal of very sensitive data, so we deal with many clients that have to ensure that we develop products in a safe, secure and certified manner. Recently, we completed our work to be compliant with HIPAA standards as a business associate. We are in the process now of completing our certification through the SSAE-16 standards. We have our own servers to manage our clients in a very secure and isolated environment. Those are typical of the kind of clients that we normally deal with.

They come from all walks of life and all shapes and sizes.

CEOCFO: What is the secret to a successful implementation and how do you make sure it is a smooth transition?

Mr. Nixon: The fear with any IT project is how will it go down once we start to implement. I think that is where the approach of being close to the client and having the client involved in the process really pays off. They do not have to build code and do all of the wonderfully creative work that our people do, but they are intimately involved every step of the way. We actually welcomed them into the process as opposed to say ask them to stay outside of it. What we find is that high level of involvement, communication and understanding really allows them to go ahead with implementation with confidence and a level of ownership in the new technology or the new solution. We actually ask our clients to have somebody designated internally as a product owner and we do that because we want the client just as vested as we are. When you have that, you then have an environment that ensures a high level of success in the implementation phase. We do the normal sorts of things like proof of concepts, beta testing and test groups. At the end of the day, it is client intimacy that is the big differentiating factor.

CEOCFO: How is business these days?

Mr. Nixon: Business is great. We are very blessed that we have a great clientele base. We have great partners in IBM and Sugar and several others. Our business has been very strong these last few years and in particular this year. Our belief is that it's a great time for us to be expanding. We have almost doubled the size of our workforce just in the last six months. We are committed, as a core part of our strategy, to continue to reinvest in this business. Everything we do and learn we are putting back into the business so that we can continue to do the great work that we do for our clients on an extended basis.

CEOCFO: What is the plan for the next year or so?

Mr. Nixon: We have created a strategy called our True North Strategy, which is focused on the client. Our belief is that we want to be the trusted advisor for clients who are looking for business solutions that make them more efficient as well as productive and competitive. To do that, we have four key elements to that strategy; ensure our offering is relevant and that we are able to reach a larger number of customers, that clients have a great experience with us every time they deal with us. We have a plan around using our growth as an opportunity to invest in the business, primarily in our people because they are the difference. And we want to continue to attract and retain great people. It is a fairly simple idea with very complex roots to it. We think focusing on these elements for the next five years will allow us to build a solid business that is highly reliable and highly valued by those that use us.

CEOCFO: What do you and your team bring to the table from previous experience that have been most helpful in forming and expanding Highland Solutions?

Mr. Nixon: I think the real power of the Highland team is that we bring very talented people into the business from very different walks of life. I am not a technologist; I was born and raised in my career into the manufacturing and distribution marketplace. We have people from all walks of life, as well as from big companies and small, technical backgrounds and industry expertise. I think what really attracts people to Highland and in turn what creates value for our clients is that we have a great environment and a great culture of learning, support and transparency. We have an environment of high ethics and integrity and have a little fun here too! We attract great people who in turn create a great experience for our clients. I think what clients enjoy most about us is that they are not only able to get the benefits of the great diversity of ideas our team possesses, but they are also getting a great diversity of people working with them. We do all of our work in the states; which we think is a real differentiator for us. It creates a much tighter development process

and a more intimate process with our clients. You can actually come and see the people who are doing the work.

CEOCFO: Why should the business and investment community pay attention to Highland Solutions?

Mr. Nixon: We are in a position to serve a very underserved market. For instance, in the world of just CRM alone it has been estimated that there are as many as 480 million potential users out in the world today and only about 18 million of those people are actually using a CRM system. So, there is a huge market potential for the sorts of products and services that Highland provides. We are a well-run

business with lots of talent people in the business. I think that is something to be keen on and watch out for. We are on a very fast growth track and we do not think that is by accident. If I am an investor, I am going to look for great markets that are underserved, great companies that have solid foundations both financially and from a talent perspective, and have a wide and solid portfolio of clients. That's Highland!

CEOCFO: Final thoughts?

Mr. Nixon: We are absolutely excited about the market and about our position in the market. We are experiencing great growth but also know that we want to make sure that we are

really intimate with our clients and do not lose sight of that. It's that people connection that's so important because so much of what we do is with people, not technology. That is why people come to Highland... for our intellect, our thoughts and our thoughtfulness. We are just thrilled that we are attracting the people that we have and believe now is the time for investment and to really be focused on our clients. We are thrilled at what is going on and look forward to a great 2013 and beyond.



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