

# Being a Part of Something Special

An Interview with William D. Green, Chairman, Accenture

**EDITORS' NOTE** Bill Green has served on Accenture's Board of Directors since its inception in 2001. From September 2004 through December 2010, Green served as Accenture's Chief Executive Officer. He assumed the additional role of Chairman in 2006. Prior to serving as CEO, Green was Accenture's Chief Operating Officer-Client Services. In addition, he served as Group Chief Executive of the Communications & High Tech operating group from 1999 to 2003. He was also Group Chief Executive of the Resources operating group for two years. Earlier in his career, Green led the Manufacturing industry group and was Managing Director for Accenture's business in the United States. Green serves as Chairman of the Business Roundtable's Education, Innovation and Workforce Initiative and previously served as Chairman of The Springboard Project. He is Co-Chair of the Business Coalition for Student Achievement. Green serves on the Board of Directors of The McGraw-Hill Companies. He joined Accenture in 1977 and became a partner in 1986. He attended Dean College and received a Bachelor of Science degree in economics and a Master of Business Administration from Babson College, as well as an honorary doctor of laws.



William D. Green

**COMPANY BRIEF** With approximately 211,000 people serving clients in more than 120 countries, Accenture ([www.accenture.com](http://www.accenture.com)) is a global management consulting, technology services, and outsourcing company combining capabilities across all industries and business functions and extensive research on the world's most successful companies to help clients become high-performance businesses and governments. The company generated net revenues of \$21.6 billion for the fiscal year ended Aug. 31, 2010.

**What do you attribute Accenture's growth to and how is the company positioned today?**

We're a very client-focused company. If you go back in our history, we used to provide services, but now we provide business outcomes. That means putting your money where your mouth is with "been there, done that" experience and confidence in not only giving good advice but on taking the advice and turning it into reality.

Challenging market situations, massive economic challenges, globalization agendas required by a world that is getting smaller, and the need to operate on a consistent basis globally, are issues that are right in our sweet spot.

We are able to deliver good results for clients through some very challenging times by helping them operate more efficiently and moving their growth agendas forward.

**Accenture is known for its work with large, global companies. Do you also support small to medium growth companies?**

Our business comes primarily from the Global 2000 and the people in the Global 2000 continue to change over time. In fact, there is the rise of what we call the Emerging Market Multinational. If you look at how the Fortune 500 list has changed over the past 20 years, you see a new set of companies and those are companies we tend to work with. Our clients are companies that have the will and the resolve to change along with the changing external forces they face.

**What is Accenture's history in the emerging markets and what is your outlook for their development?**

Brazil is in a class by itself. It is a mature country and it's not their geography or GDP growth rate that matters; it's the maturity of the companies in that location to do what they need to do to compete on the global stage, which entails everything from distribution systems to branding, and the integrity with which they operate their business being consistent with global standards.

So Brazil, in many ways, is a developed country. It still has huge growth and opportunities, but what it does, it does exceptionally well. We have more than 7,000 people in Brazil.

China and India are the next two that have the hot growth rates.

We first start leveraging supply, ideas, and talent from those countries and then we have two sets of clients: one is the local companies that have decided to compete globally and the other is the large local companies that compete on a regional basis.

I think, though, in some ways, the BRICs cause people to overlook the other opportunities out there. ASEAN, the South Asia

area – Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam – offers incredible growth potential, so we're investing heavily there. The Middle East with the UAE at the core – Abu Dhabi, Dubai and so forth – is coming on quickly. South Africa, not only in terms of South Africa as a country, which continues to grow nicely and mature very quickly, but also South Africa as a staging area for a Sub-Saharan Africa agenda – that is an area that continues to get more and more attention from countries like China, or some of the Indian companies like Bharti that have moved into the African continent to capture the mobility market. Also, Latin American countries like Chile and Peru have now become the headquarters to a few of the world's biggest companies.

**Is it challenging in some of those emerging markets to find the talent you need to provide the service Accenture is known for?**

Our advantage is that we're a human capital company. If you get down to the core competency of Accenture, it's attracting, training, and deploying talent.

In India, we were able to go from about 500 to more than 60,000 people in the past seven years. So there is incredible talent and ambition available in these markets. The combination of talent and ambition is incredibly powerful. That is what these emerging markets bring forth.

**Is it challenging to manage the growth when it's coming at that speed?**

I thought it would be, but this is where the global nature of our company serves us well. We don't see country borders necessarily. We look at it by local responsiveness and market offerings, even though we serve clients in more than 120 countries. That lets us filter the culture from the developed markets that got us here into the emerging markets on a client-by-client basis.

What is most profound and what I'm most proud of is that the culture, the values, the integrity, and what we call the "secret sauce" of Accenture is more alive and well today than it was six years ago, even though we have expanded into all these places around the world. When I travel to India, I can see clearly that our culture and our values are as alive in Bangalore as they are in Boston.

**How critical is corporate social responsibility to the brand and is that a responsibility of leaders today?**

I see it as a responsibility, but more importantly, as an opportunity. We tend to associate the word philanthropy with giving, but we should also associate it with getting because what you learn by engaging in the communities where your people live and work is profound.

The mistake global companies make is thinking one size fits all. What you learn by immersing in these cultures around the world and what you learn by doing things that matter are incredibly important.

When I do a town hall meeting anywhere in the world, one of the first questions I get is about sustainability and our commitment to it, as well as about our Skills to Succeed program, which focuses on education and equipping people to learn, grow, and make a contribution in today's economy.

The values of our employees are very much aligned with corporate social responsibility in the broadest sense. Today, people make choices about where they want to work based on the character of a company. People want to be part of something special and that is more about what you learn and do than how much you make.

**Is it important that those efforts align with the business strategy?**

The most profound program we have created is our Skills to Succeed program, because it lines up our passion and profession.

We're exceptionally good at equipping people. We educate, energize, and inspire. Education is important, but inspiration is where the power is. So it's about taking what we do for ourselves and turning it into something for the communities in which we work and live. Because then we're taking what we know how to do – our profession – and we're executing it with passion to make a difference in these places.

So the realignment of our corporate social responsibility agenda with what our core competence is has been a force multiplier in terms of the value we can deliver per unit of time or money.

**In terms of the debate about the U.S. losing its competitiveness and edge in innovation to emerging markets, is there merit to that and are you concerned?**

There is no question about it and there are two dimensions: one involves being an education mecca where talent wants to come; the other is recognizing that underneath innovation is education – it is about developing talent.

If you go back over the past several years, the number one and two agenda items for the U.S. were sustainable job creation and the reform of our education system. But until we truly get focused on those things, we're going to continue to lose ground. That said, I'm optimistic that we will get the right mix of government, business, and parenting incentives to raise the water level in the tank.

I'm working now with national research institutions to look at our big research universities and the funding that comes in to support engineering, medicine, science, and technology. We have to make sure those big institutions continue to generate innovations and ideas that change the world.

At the same time, we need to make sure people develop their inbred analytical thought process, common sense, good judgment, and the ability to communicate, and that we have some post-secondary school education for our workforce across the board. To work in today's environment, 69 percent of the jobs require some post-secondary school education along with the analytical ability and the ability to communicate, which are essential.

Community colleges have 12 million people in them today who are either just starting out or are retooling their skills. We need to repurpose these institutions to develop the talent we need to fuel today's business and our innovation engine rather than focusing on some of the outdated programs they teach today.

**Will there need to be a public/private partnership to achieve true reform and how engaged should the private sector be in that reform?**

It won't happen without the private sector. Over the past two years, business was so busy playing defense that it lost the plot on playing offense.

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The companies with the best people win. So we have to engage and influence the education reform agenda; we have to put skin in the game, as we are trying to do with our Skills to Succeed program; and we need to get mentally aligned with what it takes to compete and win in the future.

This is not a quick fix so we better get working on it now.

**In the CEO role and now as Chairman, how challenging is it with so much responsibility to focus on client time?**

In our company, there are two things you have to get right: relevance to clients, which means you have solutions to their biggest issues and you can help them take things off their plate; and relevance to people – that men and women want to work here.

As the CEO, the most important thing then is showing up. There is nothing I like better

than to look at the month ahead and remove the administrative nonsense and replace it with client or people interactions, because that is where I learn and become a better leader.

**When you joined Accenture, did you ever imagine that, some 33 years later, you'd still be there and that you would have had the opportunity you've been afforded?**

We do employee engagement surveys every year and there has always been a question on the survey that asks if the employee plans to be with Accenture two years from now? I always checked no.

In 1982, I did get offered another job and I went to Dick Boyle who was running the Hartford office to tell him, and he said, Bill you know what you have here. You will make the right decision.

At that moment, I started thinking about what I did have with Accenture: I work with great people; we do important work; I have tremendous pride; and I'm learning and doing exciting work.

I've never thought of doing anything else since then.

**As you look at the transition to the Chairman role, is it tough sometimes to step back?**

If you've ever thought the success of the company was about you, you're missing the point.

My obligation was not to coach and steer, but to prepare talent to lead this company and to make sure they all knew that, no matter who we chose as my successor, it wasn't going to be about them anymore than it was about me – it would be about the team.

We have a global leadership team and they're not only colleagues, they're friends, and friends help friends.

So I'm confident that the best of Accenture is ahead of us. One of our core values is stewardship, which says that you inherit this company from the people who went before you and your job is to make it a better company, and at the right time, put it in the hands of the next generation who will take it to a level that you can't even fathom.

So I live the stewardship principle every day and that is what I have tried to demonstrate in the succession process.

**Can you picture a day when you will ever slow down?**

To lead Accenture you can be one of three things: a visionary, an operator, or a client guy. And I'm a client guy.

So in a high-touch company, which we are, I hope to continue to help shape the future by making sure we're being responsive to the clients we have.

I still have fun every day in my 34th year and I'm not sure it gets better than that.

I realized it was a unique opportunity coming out of the downturn strong with the positioning we've put our company in, because I operate the company with the philosophy that we have one foot in today and one foot in tomorrow.

And I'm pleased with our execution and results, but I'm more pleased with our positioning for the future. ●