

AFTER HOLDING SENIOR EXECUTIVE POSITIONS in tech in San Francisco and New York City, Julie Iskow found herself looking at a position at cloud company Workiva, headquartered in Ames, Iowa. “I admit, I thought to myself, ‘Who’s got a tech company headquartered in Ames, Iowa? What is this?’ It’s a lovely area, but not one you think of for a tech startup,” she says. “But then when I started interviewing, I got excited.”

Today, she’s Workiva’s President and CEO. A global software-as-a-service platform founded in 2008, Workiva offers a multi-tiered cloud platform companies use to connect data from hundreds of disparate systems and to create, review and publish data-linked business and regulatory reports and disclosures. The platform helps simplify the increasingly complex work of data reporting and maintain consistency and transparency through all the various reports and applications.

A publicly traded company with a well over \$5 billion market cap, Workiva counts 80% of the Fortune

President and CEO **JULIE ISKOW** talks to **CARLTON WILKINSON** about Workiva’s reporting platform and the people-first approach that keeps the company among the top places to work.

“Coming from that background, I saw opportunity in the data that Workiva had,” she says. “I also saw a huge international growth opportunity. I saw a company that was very quiet; the world didn’t know much about it yet. And I came to love the company and the people. Workiva has the most amazing culture that I’ve been in—it’s second-to-none.”

Brunswick Review spoke with her in our San Francisco office about her life, her passion for her work and her continued vision for Workiva’s opportunities. Iskow grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area, and spent the better part of her professional career in Silicon Valley. With family in the area, she is still deeply attached to the city and travels from there to the company’s various offices on three continents.

“I love the smart people, I love the technology, and we’re forward-thinking,” she says of the Bay Area. “It’s beautiful and relaxed. But make no mistake about it, we get shit done.”

Coming into the CEO position from COO, has your perspective changed?

I wouldn’t say my perspective has changed, but I feel differently in the CEO role. My sense of responsibility has changed; I feel the weight of the entire company’s success on me. The buck stops with me, and the responsibility is massive. The gravity of the role makes me feel differently.

It’s my first CEO job, and it’s a public company at a time when public companies are under a lot of stakeholder scrutiny. The market is more focused on profits, efficiencies and performance than they have been over the last several years. That’s just part of the normal ebb and flow of the market, but it means I have to respond to market pressures in the right way. I’m not following a herd mentality. I’m doing what’s right for Workiva. We want to move to \$1 billion of revenue and beyond. So we really need to grow up, to scale.

The right way to do that is with a people-first mindset, making sure the entire company is with us, that everyone understands why we’re changing,

Transformative TECH LEADER

1000 businesses as customers. It has 2,500 employees and has been consistently included on the Fortune list of 100 Best Companies to Work For and has received an “AAA” rating in MSCI’s ESG Ratings Assessment for two consecutive years.

Iskow joined as Chief Operating Officer in 2019 and worked closely with founder CEO Marty Vanderploeg over the next three and a half years. She took over as CEO in April of 2023. She had previously been Executive Vice President and Chief Technology Officer at SaaS life sciences company Medidata Solutions, and before that, Senior Vice President of Product Development and Chief Information Officer at another SaaS company, WageWorks.



PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF WORKIVA

why we bring in new talent to complement existing talent. Culture continues to be front and center for Workiva. We have an award-winning culture and we strive and work hard to keep it that way as we grow.

Is it harder when you're taking over from a founder?

I'm not just taking over from a founder. I'm taking over from a founder who is a beloved icon. The company loved him in his role; he was Workiva. So taking over for him doesn't just mean keeping the company rolling or executing on a strategy. There's a people element here too, and that is the hardest part—following in his footsteps.

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In the all-company meeting where Marty handed over the baton, I told them, I'm not going to step into those shoes. Because I can't. No one could. I'm just going to be the best CEO I can be. He's now Non-Executive Chair of our board so we talk a couple times a week. He's a great sounding board. The company's 15 years old and he was there since day one. I would be foolish not to leverage all of that. It's a really healthy relationship that I think we both appreciate. Do we have differences? Occasionally. But I'm lucky to have that rapport with him and his support. That doesn't always happen.

Every job in tech that I've had has been with a founder. Workiva is my fifth one. I'm actually

about to publish an article about that, working with founders. You cannot work in a founder-led company and for a founder and have a huge ego. I mean, everyone has an ego, but you have to check it at the door. I've learned a lot and I'm careful to preserve the strengths of my relationship with him—so I can continue to learn and do what's best for Workiva.

What are your other big challenges as CEO?

It's very different running a company today than it has been in the past. The role of a CEO has been transformed. A lot of it has to do with an awareness of the well-being of people—employees, customers and community. The return-to-office issue, for instance: This is a CEO-level conversation in every company, whether employees will be allowed to choose where they work, how to do right by employees and the business. It's a difficult conversation and every business is different.

We've decided on a flexible work policy of “work where you work best,” empowering our employees to find the balance of work from home or in the office that best suits them. We see a lot of positive impacts from this approach.

And that's just one thing. As CEO, you have to think about staying innovative and resilient, staying ahead of the competition, making sure teams are aligned, ensuring you're attracting the right talent, including diverse talent, and retaining that talent, making sure you're thinking about the communities in which you operate, the environment that you interface with, all the governance concerns—and doing all those things in the right way, being good corporate citizens. It's all of that. And that's what the CEO job has become. There's so much more to it than achieving a growth target.

Tell me about the Workiva platform. You've called it “transformative”—how so?

Workiva is a platform company. We shine when data consistency, integrity and accuracy are critical and a clear narrative is required.

As I mentioned, one of the reasons I joined Workiva nearly four years ago is because I saw the incredible potential. It was unlike any other platform company that I had worked with and I had been in several. We have a true platform. And today, we are the only platform that brings financial reporting, ESG and GRC [governance, risk and compliance] together in one secure, controlled, audit-ready environment. We call it Assured Integrated Reporting. Our platform is a strong and key differentiator in the marketplace.

“BY SHOWING THAT YOU'RE IDENTIFYING, REPORTING AND TRACKING YOUR RISKS, YOU'RE SAYING, 'WE WANT TO BE A GOOD COMPANY THAT DOES RIGHT BY OUR STAKEHOLDERS, NOT JUST SHAREHOLDERS.'”

The success of our platform comes from relentless innovation. It's in our DNA. Innovation is about connecting the dots between the current reality and the future possibility, transforming things for the better. By advancing a current process, product or technology, we're moving it forward to create impact.

We drive ourselves to identify opportunities for, and understand the challenges of, our customers, and for our future customers and then create solutions that transform the way they work and their ability to succeed in this dynamic world of regulation and reporting.

So, yes, our platform is transformative. And not just for the companies themselves, but for the larger community of stakeholders because of the importance that transparency and accurate reporting can have. I honestly can't think of a better company to be leading in these times.

You had an article published in January of last year titled “ESG is Here, and There's No Turning Back.” There's been a lot of pushback on ESG since then. Do you stand by that?

Yes, I stand by it, but I don't need to take a side. When we look at the ESG regulatory environment, there is North America and the rest of the world. Here in the US, ESG has emerged as a critical and sometimes polarizing topic. But in Europe, for example, we don't see that political debate. In fact, they have passed laws and reporting standards that are providing a roadmap for corporations to prepare for increased disclosures.

While the US regulations continue to evolve, we continue to see steady demand from our customers. And that is for a number of reasons: It's stakeholder demand, it's risk management, it's to report on the science-based targets and net-zero commitments that many of these organizations have already made.

It's also to prepare for what many organizations see as upcoming regulation whether it be from the SEC, state of California or the CSRD [Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive] in Europe which many US-based organizations will have to comply with. The CSRD specifically outlines that organizations with an EU entity that has a net turnover of €150 million in the EU must comply with the CSRD.

So businesses are doing it anyway. Even in the US, ESG remained one of our top solutions in bookings performance for several quarters.

By showing that you're identifying, reporting and tracking your risks, you're saying, “We want to be a good company that does right by our stakeholders, not just shareholders.”

Software as a service crosses dozens of sectors—but even so, it’s a distinct and still-young area on its own, with a lot of consolidation going on. How does Workiva regard that?

There is a lot of consolidation activity these days. It’s really hard to scale a SaaS company to a billion dollars. It’s even rare where we are, over the \$500 million mark. There are tons of SaaS companies out there, but they’re mostly very small. Some fail, some get sold to private equity or to legacy companies—companies that aren’t SaaS, that don’t yet have cloud components. Even banks are starting to buy SaaS software. They need those services to stay competitive.

The market pressures out there, expectations of the Street, the drive for growth—all those things keep me going. I try to build the best company I can. We continue to invest in our future opportunities—ESG for example. Workiva is already in rare air as very few SaaS companies get to the \$500 million mark on their own. Our executive team and I are focused on growth to the billion-dollar mark and beyond.

Can you talk about AI as part of that opportunity investment?

“Generative AI is going to change the way we do business,” that’s the sentiment you hear these days.

“TODAY MY LIFE IS WORKIVA AND MY FAMILY AND FRIENDS. AND I’M ABOUT AS CONTENT AS I COULD POSSIBLY BE.”



President and CEO Julie Iskow speaks at a Workiva employee Town Hall meeting.

And we’re definitely embracing it. On our earnings call, I pointed to our press release where we talked about leveraging the Large Language Models (LLMs) from Google and Microsoft.

But AI is an area that’s not new to Workiva, or to me. At my last company, a life sciences tech company, we transitioned from an emphasis on cloud technology in the way companies work, to a focus on analytics with a huge data science team, and we leveraged the data that we had. At Workiva, we’re not new to this space. We started a data science team a number of years ago and have been releasing and productizing capabilities.

I don’t want to seem tentative on it, because I’m not. We’re already rolling out leveraged LLMs in-app in the Workiva platform. But is it going to transform everything this minute? No. Can it help? Can it be a productivity enhancer in our platform? Absolutely. And it will be. We see AI as transformative technology that will shape the next decade of innovation. It will be our customers’ co-pilot for writing content, brainstorming ideas, generating insights and automating tasks. It’s an in-app feature, so it helps them do things in our platform a little bit faster and easier.

And we work to ensure the customer’s data is secure. By having enterprise-grade security we’ve eliminated one of the top concerns of using tools like ChatGPT: security. And our customers’ data within the Workiva platform—including inputs to the AI feature—are not used to train the Generative AI model.

What do you do for fun?

Everyone expects me to say, “I go skydiving,” “I ski,” “I play golf or tennis”—I mean, I did some of that stuff in an earlier day. But today my life is Workiva and my family and friends. And I’m about as content as I could possibly be. I travel for work, so I’m not lacking that, and I have been doing that for a long time.

I play the piano. I don’t practice anymore. But I’ll be walking by the piano and stop and play something. I enjoy it. My favorite piece of furniture is my piano. But honestly, my job is my fun time and when I’m not working, my fun is about my family and the people around me.

When my family’s all together and having dinner, or having fun or whatever, I’ll look out and think, “This is life.” This is why I do what I do every day; I live for these moments. ♦

CARLTON WILKINSON is a Brunswick Director and Managing Editor of the *Brunswick Review*.