James G. Argiropoulos Oral History

COMPUTERWORLD HONORS PROGRAM INTERNATIONAL ARCHIVES

Transcript of a Video History Interview with
James G. Argiropoulos
First Deputy
Office of Emergency Management and Communications (OEMC)
City of Chicago

Recipient of the 2009 IBM Global Public Sector Innovation Excellence Leadership Award

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

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Chicago, Illinois

Today is Monday, May 11, 2009 and we're interviewing James G. Argiropoulos, First Deputy, Office of Emergency Management and Communications (OEMC), City of Chicago.

James is the 2009 recipient of the IBM Global Public Sector Innovation Excellence Leadership Award.

The interview is taking place at the City of Chicago's Office of Emergency Management and Communications, and is made possible by IBM 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, and Roger Kennedy of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. It is now the world's largest IT awards program.

This oral history is being recorded for distribution to more than 350 national archives, museums, universities and research institutions in more than fifty countries on six continents around the world, and 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: Jim, you were originally born in Chicago, tell us about that.

James Argiropoulos: I was originally born in Chicago. My mother and father were from the south side. I lived here until I was about 12 years old. I attended grammar school here. When I became a little older I actually moved to Kentucky at the age of 13, and I was there a little over 12 years.

RM: Tell me a little about your family's influence on your early years.

JA: My father passed away when I was very young. My mother has really been a driving force in who I am today. I owe her the credit. She taught me the moral values and the hard work and the ethics that I still carry into not only my personal life, but my job as well. So I owe that credit all to her.

RM: Your mother's family is from Kentucky?

JA: My mothers' family is originally from Kentucky. A lot of them were here when I was much younger, but most of them have retired and have moved to Kentucky.

RM: Were there other influences on you when you were in your teens?

JA: My Mom really was a driving force. I pretty much looked up to her for everything. I remember the sacrifices that she made since I didn't have a father. She was a single parent working very hard to ensure that I had all of the necessities and the other things that I wanted as a child. So I really look at her as that driving force that really continues to make me work hard, and continue to strive for more.

RM: Tell us a little about the values that your mother had that she instilled in you at a young age.

JA: My mom was a very hard working individual. She always taught me that you work hard, and you treat others like you want to be treated. If you have dollars, you obviously always pay your bills. Then if you have money left, that will obviously go to what you want and is not necessary. But she was very hard working, a very dedicated lady that taught us that you respect others. She brought us up in a very good home, and I think that who I am today, and where I am today, is 100% a direct result of how my mother raised me.

RM: I understand that at age 15 you became a cadet of the Williamsburg, Kentucky Fire and Police Communication section. Tell us what that was like.

JA: Well, I was looking for something to do. The Southeastern Kentucky community was a very rural area. One person that was in the fire department was actually my brother's boss. I went down there one evening to meet with those folks, and one thing led to another. The next thing I knew I was actually there answering the telephone on non-mission critical calls. I then started to migrate into life threatening calls. We didn't have a 911 system then. It was your tradition 7-digit dial number. I continued to volunteer my time there all the way through high school until I was 18.

I was actually one of the youngest people ever hired in that fire department. I went on to become a paramedic. I was a paramedic in that fire department a little over 10 years, and the county judge executive, or the equivalent of a county board president, actually came to me and asked me to start to develop their 9-1-1 system. I actually implemented their system from scratch. We had nothing. We had to address the entire city and the county, and actually put in what was at that time, a state of the art 9-1-1 system, which is still in existence today.

RM: How old were you when you started the 9-1-1 architecture?

JA: I was about 21 years old. I felt very fortunate that I had a lot of street experience. I had seen a lot of horrific things – human tragedy at it's worst, and it really helped me to develop the mindset of placing technology in the appropriate hands, and the type of technology that would be needed to really help solve a major gap, which of course was the existing multi-seven-digit dial numbers, which would be combined under the new 9-1-1. I learned by being in the field, and understanding what the user needs, as a paramedic and as a firefighter, and then working with the police. I had been around all of those folks since I was 15 years old. This is all I have known for 30 years of my life. And I really think that that field experience is what helped me in migrating to a very well-architected 9-1-1 system.

When I started to develop that 9-1-1 system there, understand that there was nothing in existence. I really had to go to that school of hard knocks if you will, to understand telephone technology, five-e versus digital switching. The master street address guides are that bible for the database for 9-1-1. So I was starting to integrate radio communications and computer systems together to really formulate a then state-of-the-art 9-1-1 system. So it was really trial by error. I had to do a lot of reading, a lot of researching, and then combine it with a lot of practical knowledge in the streets to put that system together.

RM: You were in Williamsburg, Kentucky, for quite some time. Tell us about your experience there being the only paramedic.

JA: I worked midnights a lot of my career in the fire department, and I held those police officers that worked the midnight watch in the highest regard. Being a small, rural community, I was really their first line of defense. The closest hospital was approximately 18 miles away, and depending on the significance of what was happening - especially a police officer that was shot - I could have potentially been the difference between life and death. Thank goodness, nothing catastrophic happened. But I always held a very high regard for those officers. I knew I had my first aid kit and my response kit with me 24 hours a day to help them first and foremost, but of course the goal is, if we can help each other and the first responder, how can we help the community? Of course the community was very important to me.

But being a paramedic in a rural area that really had no pre-hospital existinence before myself, and not having a close hospital within blocks of vicinity, that's a tall order. I really had a huge burden on my shoulders.

RM: Can you cite some examples that were pivotal in terms of how your experience grew in that environment?

JA: You know they talk about a fire truck's lights and siren in the eyes of a child, and how sometimes that's nothing more than just a glimmer and excitement. For me it became a passion. And I think that not having a father, and being just with my mom as a single parent, it really caused me to gravitate to something I really liked. I grew up quick. I started actually working at 15 years old to help support my mother. She had some pre-existing medical conditions. Thank goodness nothing life threatening. But besides my job and school, I really came to just love the passion of being able to answer calls; being able to respond with that engine; being able to help a person who is potentially on death's door - or start CPR - or stop bleeding - or put that fire out. That just drove a desire to want to do more. When I saw human tragedy at its worst, and I saw how I could effect change, it really continued to drive me. It wasn't for the money. It was for the passion to make a difference in my community.

RM: You received many certifications while still in Kentucky. How did they influence your future career?

JA: Well one of the things that I partook of several times was a teaching methodology course. It was at Eastern Kentucky University. It was huge for me in terms of methods of instruction. So I went on to teach several hundred hours of fire classes; emergency medical technician classes; and then even participated in some paramedic classes. And I think that taking the passion and desire that I had, the practical experience of being out on the street, and then the desire to want to teach others who I potentially could influence with my passion and desire, really made me want to continue to teach. I secured a rescue system, jaws-of-life, airbags, and things of that nature for my community. So then I became an extrication instructor, once again trained at Eastern Kentucky University.

Then I took many science courses at the University of Kentucky, learning the whole methodology of fire; the whole fire suppression theory; jet fuel, or explosions of hazardous materials. All of the educational classes that I participated in, really came full circle when I was tasked with the responsibility of now implementing a 9-1-1 system. That system is the core nucleus of that call that comes in, and then all of the offshoot services that are provided, police, fire and EMS. But my experiences on the streets, having that understanding, and then my education, combined with my desire to help those first responders, and the community – really brought that entirely full circle for me.

RM: The people you met through some of those courses, have you stayed in touch with them?

JA: My job today is a 7-day a week job. It's nothing you take lightly. Early on I did stay in touch with some of those folks. Over the years I have obviously drifted. I do from time to time see the hometown newspaper there, and I will see people who have been part of a class, or maybe people that have moved into management that are still there and alive and well. But I haven't been in a position to keep up with folks. The magnitude and enormity of what I do here today in the city takes up all of your time.

RM: They're all watching you now.

JA: Well I hope so.

RM: You were in charge in one of the largest search and rescue missions in Kentucky history that lasted 23 days. What was that like?

JA: We had a young lady who was visiting our area. We had the 8th largest county in Kentucky, and we very fortunate to have a very scenic area, which was referred to as the Cumberland Falls. It's kind of a mini-Niagara Falls. Unfortunately, a lady who was visiting with her family got too far over the edge of a support beam and fell over the falls into the water. I conducted a very large water recovery operation for 23 days searching for her. It was very tireless, very endless. We had helicopters involved. We had the Kentucky state police involved. We had many area rescue squads. It was a very large endeavor that took close to a month. My passion to find her and bring her home to her family was in fact my goal. And because I had developed the 9-1-1 system, the county board president actually asked me to become the emergency management director. So part of those responsibilities was really a holistic approach to police, fire, EMS, 9-1-1, and emergency management. It was a very, very, very tiring effort, but at the end of the day we were able to find her. We were able to bring her back to her family.

RM: What effect did the Intergovernmental Executive Development Program have on you? Was it more learning for you, or was it opening doors to other things?

JA: It was a very enlightening course. I can't say enough good things about it. It was a combination of human skills, a combination of developing relationships with existing city employees as well as outside of the city. It was really effective for bridging a communications gap with folks that I didn't know, that I still talk with today. It involved a whole lot of thought processes, about how you construct and implement a large-scale project. It encompassed the entire lifecycle of large-scales projects; the budgeting aspects; the continuing operations; the maintenance, and support after a project.

So this class covered the entire lifecycle of pretty much anything that you want to do from a governmental perspective. And I think at the end of the day it really taught me to utilize time more effectively. It enabled me to be more open in terms of communications; to develop relationships with folks outside of your domain, and really continue to strive to do better. Those instructors from that class are still a part of city government, and I still talk to them today.

RM: Tell me about your evolution to you managing IT in OEMC.

JA: The Office of Emergency Management and Communications opened September 25th, 1995, at the cost of $217 million. Approximately 10 months prior to the existence of this facility I was a police employee, a dispatcher at the old police communication center. So when we processed the first call on September the 25th at 4AM, I was here. My job at that time was to come over from an administration stand point and help with policies and procedures. Probably two months before the existence of this facility I was tasked with updating data plans, and data fields within the computer aided dispatch system. So I spent 7 days a week starting to build a core foundation of the computer systems here as it related to data.

As time went on, I influenced the computer aided dispatch vendor, in terms of screen layouts, concepts of design, architectural foundation, which I personally feel is a world class organization today. And the core foundation of this building is really centered around the computer aided dispatch system. What I then did was work with the telephone system to integrate the 9-1-1 callers with the computer system, and then integrating the radio system directly to the CAD (computer aided dispatch system).

Now here we are 13 years later, and due to the beautiful and great vision of our Mayor, I was promoted to the First Deputy, which is the number two person of this organization. The technology folks still report to me to today. And I think that my vision and my drive and my desire is to do more to continue to mature systems; continue to integrate systems; because that's what it's all about at the end of the day. It's about the 3 million people outside of these walls that we serve – the citizens of the City of Chicago.

RM: Talk about the integration of the telecommunications. I understand AT&T brings the communications to the building and you take it all from there.

JA: We're very fortunate. I feel very fortunate because this is all I have done for 30 years. I have talked to people all over this great nation in terms of their 9-1-1 systems. One of the things that we do very well here, and really sets us head and shoulder above the rest, is that we actually own our own telephone company here. We have over 500 miles of fiber and 850 miles of copper, that bring every police, fire and strategic government location back here. In addition we also produce our own dial tone. So out of some 1,150 people that actually people that work here, 70 men and women take care of all of our network infrastructure and the wide area network. We actually have fiber crews. We have tunnel crews. We have fiber splicers. We even have area bucket trucks running around the city taking care of the copper. But anything from delivering dial tone, all the way to critical communications, has really been the driving force of this organization.

And I have to give credit where credit is due. It's very important. We could not have remotely achieved what we've done today had it not been for the vision of our Mayor. He is the driving force that allows us to spend dollars, allows us to mature systems, allows us to continue to strive to be the best. It was all his vision. He took 3 old communication centers, 2 old fire centers, and an old police communications, and combined them into this state of the art facility. He continues to push us, and we continue to mature, evolve and implement systems to today.

RM: How does the culture of the city of Chicago then internally impact OEMC?

JA: You know, a lot about folks say, 'Government employees are 9 to 5ers'. They hang their coat up at the end of the day, and we will see you tomorrow morning.' However the mindset and the culture here is, mission critical. It's not Dominos pizza. You can't mess up and we'll deliver you another one in 30 minutes or less. Here, people come home in body bags. So it's a very critical job. It's one that we take very seriously. It's not a job. It's a passion. It's a desire. You want to do more. You want to improve the quality of life for the people in the City of Chicago.

911 taught us a whole lot in terms of the very tragic event that happened in New York City, and the countless great men and women that died. At the end of the day here, it made us stronger. It made us wiser. It caused us to want to implement even more. It caused us to want to implement even a larger more robust network infrastructure, more systems, more capabilities with surveillance and video technology.

We just undertook a program with Northrop Grumman and IBM where we integrated our entire video surveillance system directly into our computer aided dispatch system. This center processes 5.2 million calls a year. In June, July and August, we process about 23,000 calls a day. When the men and women on that operations floor that actually process a call, whether it's a cell phone or a wired call, when the latitude and longitude of the call is passed to our CAD system it reverse geocodes it. It turns it into a physical address and immediately paints 150-foot bulls-eye around that address. And if there are any cameras within the vicinity it instantaneously provides them to the call taker. We've had countless circumstance occur where video has been directly placed to the call taker, where he or she was on the call with the citizen, that effected a great outcome – someone went to jail potentially, or could have potentially saved a life in an accident. Integrating all that into a subsystem to make them look seamless to the user is what we're all about here.

RM: Comment on this quote you said once Jim, "We're in the life saving business. I have only one chance. So I have to be guaranteed delivery."

JA: Our core values and the core product that we deliver here is life saving services. The police officer, the firefighter, the paramedic, the emergency management person, technically would not be able to respond without us. So we really have one chance to do it right. The men and women around the country that are dedicated police officers, and fire fighters, have a very strong call taker and dispatcher behind them. I look at the 9-1-1 system and I say from the standpoint of day-to-day operations, we're the unsung hero. The nucleus of that call will either have a great outcome or a very poor outcome depending on how we process the call. It is reliant on the appropriate information we take; the appropriate we spoon-feed to that first provider, or first responder.

Since the citizens technically never see the 9-1-1 operations, they really see that as the police officer and firefighter who comes to your door, the one who saves your baby's life, who puts that fire out. But it's the dedicated, hardworking men and women here in this center and across the nation, that actually process those calls. They are the people the public never sees, but at the end of the day the outcome of that particular call is either a great one, or a very poor one by the service we provide here. So we only have one shot at it, and we have to do it right at least 5.2 millions times a year.

RM: So the role of IT in a public sector context, when you're in a life saving role, is quite different than corporate America.

JA: I look back at where I started in Kentucky, I feel that I am more of a well rounded individual. I understand a very small budget from Kentucky, and I understand a two-council operation. Now I'm here with 109 workstations, and a 101-million dollar a year budget.

Looking at the budget disparities, looking at the level of operations, I know beyond the shadow of a doubt, technology is where we obviously have to go as a nation when it relates to public safety. 9-1-1 is 40 years old. It actually started in Haleyville, Alabama. The old days of a small radio and a card system of processing calls, has now evolved into this organization as an example, that has over 16 million dollars in servers, some 76-million dollars in software. The great men and women, 398 on police operations, and 98 on fire, actually drive the systems.

The systems that we build and implement help make decisions. But it's that very highly trained, highly skilled individual that moves those camera systems; that moves that computer aided dispatch system; that makes split second decisions on the type of response to send out for any call. The computer systems play an intricate part to take that stress off the human. The human can become fatigued. The computer aided dispatch system never gets tunnel vision. It never becomes obstructed. It always thinks clear. It does exactly what the human programmed it to do. It is just what a computer aided dispatch system is - it aids the human being.

RM: Jim, going back to your roots in Kentucky, what caused you to be so passionate about using technology in a life saving context?

JA: I have 30 years of experience now in looking at the good, bad and otherwise. I have looked at the impact of inadequate technology, or technology that actually wasn't in place, as well as looking at what we have here today. What really drives me is being in the field, and understanding the big picture of what it takes to drive that ambulance or fire engine, and living with police since I was a child, and understanding the difference in a felony stop versus going into a domestic disturbance. Through those experiences I understood the appropriate technologies that could effect an outcome of saving the first responders, because if I can't help them, at the end of the day, I obviously can't help the citizen. I think those types of initiatives are really a mindset. A lot of folks have asked me, 'How do you master these systems?' What we achieve in this organization is really a one-off. A server is a server. An Oracle database is an Oracle database. A Cisco router is a Cisco router. It's how you apply that technology that makes you one-off. We're not a business class organization. We're in the life saving business. We do have millions of dollars in technology, but it's how you use it. You have to have a vision. You have to have a passion, and you have to understand, not only the domain inside these walls, but also what goes on throughout the city at the first responder level.

A case in point – we're finishing a scope of work very soon that will actually allow us to provide more intelligence directly out to that mobile data terminal. It will give us the ability to look at the life safety systems on a police car and a fire truck. So if that vehicle is involved in an accident, it will instantaneously send; A, an inbound message to the controlling dispatcher; B, it will immediately pull a 150-foot paradigm around that accident and show us full streaming video around a police officer, or a firefighter in trouble. It will also enable a call for emergency assistance. We will soon be in a position where if a Chicago police car has an accident, airbags will deploy, and that vehicle will call its own fire response. So before a human can think - in 30 milliseconds, cameras are drawn, and an emergency accident message is at the dispatchers console. And that car has sent an inbound message to the fire CAD telling them 'I need in pin-in response and advance life support ambulance request.' That's unheard of. It's phenomenal. But I think it's really the vision of taking the tools. The technology is there. It's how you apply it. It's the difference in saying, 'Yes, I am going to pay for this rocket and send it to the moon.' It's pie in the sky stuff. This is about creatively taking the existing systems and then applying them in a very methodical, very strategic way. That's what we're all about.

RM: I am going to change direction a bit here and talk about innovation and how it is applied here at OEMC. What are the traits in innovators that you admire?

JA: I think innovators are people who are very open minded to change. The mindset of the individual that actually is trying to achieve something is very important. You have to be very open. You have to be very customer focused. When you look at Alexander Graham Bell who invented the telephone, that started out with old copper pairs. That evolved to actually transmitting voice through fiber and today, voice over IP. When you look at the early painstaking tasks to actually transmit that voice, and then look where we are today with five-e digital switches, and voice over IP on the Internet which sends your call across the nation or across the world, that's what it's all about.

I think innovation is about that the passion and desire of wanting to do the right thing. At the end of the day that's what it's all about. I think that practically applying technology in our domain is definitely a one-off. And the brightest minds that have provided technology to us over the decades looked at that globally. Here, we're very tunnel-visioned. We're very specific. It's all about protecting our first responder. It's all about protecting the citizens of Chicago.

RM: How do you further and enable innovation here at OEMC?

JA: We do that in a couple of different ways. We further innovation here by looking at our core mission, and we never rest on our laurels. We always have to continue to strive to do better, to take technology existing and increase it, and to look at implementing new strategies. As an example, all of the vendors that are part of the core mission here, provide us every quarter, or semi-yearly, a road show overview of, where's your product today? Where's your product going in the next 6 months? Where's it going over the next couple of years? That helps us to really fuel that creative thinking and get us thinking about, 'What do we need to do with the next level of technology?'

Again, I keep going back to give credit where credit is do. We have a Mayor who consistently pushes us to do more. It's almost like I'm standing behind that pickup truck that going 50 miles an hour, and if I stop running you're going to get run over. The Mayor is constantly pushing us. So it drives us to bring those technology folks in and continue to do better for the city.

RM: How do your personally define leadership?

JA: Leadership is really leading by example, being forward thinking. Not being narrow minded, and a good listener. You can't be an effective leader if you're not a good listener. I go back to what my mother has taught me, you have to treat others like you want to be treated. You have to be very hard-core and focused on the mission. You have to be very soft when you need to be, yet very stern on the opposite end of the spectrum if you have to be. If you have to put a boot in someone's rear end because you have to achieve that objective, you have to do what you have to do. But at the end of the day that carrot is dangling. The only way you're going to get a bite out of it is you have to be striving, effective, motivated, and you cannot under any circumstances, stop pushing forward. The moment that you do, you're going to fail.

RM: Another definition we heard recently about leadership is that you have to make people not want to let you down. Would you agree with that?

JA: I think that's an important factor. You have to be a motivator. If you're in the position where for example, you have 10 folks on your IT team, and information technology is what you're striving to achieve, you really have to motivate those folks. We just finished what's referred to as an intelligence cell. It's a multiple application of geo-spatial intelligence with 40-some layers of intelligence, above and below ground infrastructure. There were some bright minds at the table who have never spent one hour in the street on an explosion, never had a mother provide their baby to you at the end of the driveway dead and ask you to please save them. So I will actually instill those types of stories into the program, and I can see the fire in their eyes. I can see that spark light when I explain to them the understanding that what they are doing today can effect and change the course of action of saving somebody's life. To say that globally is one thing. You can hear that on television. But to look them in the eye and bring the passion to the table, to give them a real life experience really drives and motivates an individual to not to want to you let you down. And most import, have them understanding that at the end of the day, it's not lost revenue. Here, it's lost lives. And I think that it's very fulfilling as a programmer, as a network architect, as a system administrator, a database administrator, to go home knowing that what you've done, effectively will save countless thousands of lives. That's a motivator within itself.

RM: I have a quote from Edward Demmings dating back some 20 years. The quote is, " It is not necessary to change. Survival is not mandatory." How to you interpret that in the context of the life saving work you do here?

JA: The way that we live, and the world that we live in, post 911, has really changed focus on all of us. We watch CNN, and Fox News, and some of the other world outlets and think, how unfortunate when a specific circumstance happens overseas, and then it hits American soil. It really changes your mindset as well as your objective and deliverables, and what you're trying to achieve, and how you're trying to achieve it, and at the end of the day being able to survive. We're in a world that will never change. We live with the mindset that the next shoe is going to drop. If the next shoe does drop, we have to be there to support, to survive, to continue to move on. And the only way to do that is to train the great men and women that provide the response in the street; the great men and women behind the radio that dispatch the calls, and the IT professionals. The IT management of public safety has substantially changed in a post 911 world for obvious reasons. Those folks in those positions are not there for a 40-hour work week. They have to be there for a passionate desire or they won't last here.

RM: What are the values and ethics that you pass on through your actions to the employees in this facility?

JA: I say time and time again, my mother taught me that you treat others like you want to be treated, but also to be very hard working and motivated. We just hired a brand new project manager here. I provided him a one-hour closed door meeting, and one of the things that I said is, "If you're here for the money, you won't last more than a month. I'll get rid of you. You have to be here for the passion and desire. This is a mindset of an occupation that you can't take lightly. This is a motivation and desire to do the right thing. If you're here for a dollar, you won't last. If you're here for a passion and desire, that is the type of individual that we want here."

The IT professionals, all the men and women that are here are a dedicated group of individuals. But the way that I treat them, and the core values I instill in them goes all the way back to the roots of how my Mom taught me. She walked through the snow providing for my livelihood when my father passed away. She never had driven a car before, and she always walked everywhere, going out in the deep snow, and working countless hours and overtime to provide for me. That is the mindset that I still have today in terms of my work ethic, and my striving and desire. I take that exact mindset and approach, and I instill that around the people that surround me.

RM: We're living in the most turbulent economic time since the Great Depression. Is leadership key to us getting back to some form of normalcy?

JA: The economy has hurt us all. It has hurt every facet. Unfortunately, regardless of how the economy is, the services we provide here have not lessened. Sometimes it has even increased. The challenges that we face are no less of a challenge as a result of the economic impact to America. So from our standpoint, we obviously have to be smarter. We have to work wiser. We have to maximize the efficiency of that dollar. We have to buy systems that we know are a multi-year approach, not a multi-month approach. Don't misunderstand me, I'm not saying from a local government standpoint that pre the downturn of the economy we were any different. We're dealing with taxpayers dollars here. We have to maximize that efficiency regardless of where we are economy-wise because at the end of the day you pay tax dollars, and you desire them to be spent efficiently. So quite frankly, the downturn has maybe curtailed some of our projects, nothing of consequence that would really effect a life. But at the same time, our mindset has really been one that when you implement a project throughout the entire lifecycle, from the infancy all the way through to the conclusion and post maintenance, we strive to do the best we can ad use dollars wisely.

RM: To the people you serve, and passionately serve obviously by the way you describe it Jim, have you seen a reaction that's different from them for the service you give them?

JA: No, not really in terms of the people that are around us. The folks that are calling in 9-1-1 calls, the generalities of those are consistent. Human tragedy is still human tragedy. Calls for service are still calls for service. The people around us are looking at doing more for less, potentially cutting into four-day work weeks. Things of that nature are part of the down turn, and quite frankly, that's going to hit us all. But at the end of the day, even if it is a four day work week, that means that we obviously have ot produce more in that four days even if we have to take a pay cut.

RM: You have heard the term, "No risk, no reward." Do you agree with that?

JA: You have to be very careful. When it comes to a term like "No risk, no reward." In our business we can't afford to mess up because the end result is that somebody dies. Risk taking in this environment is something we don't condone, and is something we avoid at all costs. If that means we have to delay a project 6 months because the intricacies are not quite there, the integration is not where it should be, the desired result is somewhat off – then we have to curtail that. And if that means that we have to tell our executive director of this organization, or the mayor, that it has to wait a couple of months, at the end of the day, everyone in positions of authority know that we work hard, and we know that we can't take a risk.

There are circumstances on the private sector side that risk taking sometimes can make a difference in a big windfall. Risk taking in our business means potentially somebody dies. And at all costs that's what we have to avert. You have to live, and it can't be a result of sloppy work or inadequacies in our technology.

RM: Our chairman and founder regularly tells us that the biggest room in the world is the room for improvement. Is there any room in the Argiropoulos for improvement?

JA: Yes, beyond a shadow of a doubt. I love what I do. I am a very humble person. Here I am 30 years later, and love what I do today like I did when I was 15 years old. I'm not remotely tired of it. Is there room for improvement on my side, absolutely? Could I be a more effective listener? Of course I could. Could I do things more efficiently? Of course. Sometimes I really get down into the trenches of an application or a concept, or a design more than I should. I really should hand that off to people that are around me. Sometimes you feel like if you want it done right you have to do it yourself. That's always been a downfall of mine.

It's not saying that there are not great men and women that are here. But sometimes you just have that passion. It's almost like, as much as I could do to try to instill on that programmer or that project manager how I see the world, sometimes you just can't articulate it, and you can't see the world any better than Jim could.

So should I in fact pass those types of things off, which obviously would make me a more efficient person? Absolutely, but once again, I go back to the thought process of, you can't see the world unless you are me. At the end of the day we can't afford to do it wrong the first time. It could potentially end up in catastrophic results.

RM: The recipient of the 2007 Leadership Award, John Thompson, was the Chairman of the Board of Symantec at the time. He said, "Information is the currency of our age, and as such it has become invaluable." Do you agree with that?

JA: Absolutely, when you take the police officer, the firefighter, the emergency management person that are actually responding to a specific call for service - information is very important. Information overload is dangerous. But actually providing them with the latest and greatest intel on a specific address, a specific block face, the last 30 days at a given location - the types of fire calls that have been there - is invaluable. The mindset that you portray to an individual that is jumping off the engine, we call it a rig, or jumping off an ambulance, or getting out of the police car, could mean the difference between life and death. You can't rest on the feeling that you have this particular situation under control, because situations evolve, and they turn on you just like tornados drop out of the sky. Providing them with intelligence on buildings, on architectures, on floor layouts, on calls for service – is beyond a shadow of a doubt - invaluable to the first responder.

RM: I am going to ask you to comment on a quote from a book by Jack Welch. I know it's going to be a soft ball question based on what you have been saying, but I have to ask you. The quote is, "Leaders make sure people not only see the vision, they live and breathe it." How do you feel about that?

JA: I could not agree more. Actually I think he stole that from me somewhere down the road. You have to really love what you do. You have to really have a desire to want to do more. You have to instill your passion and desire in people that are around you, and that even goes out to the vendors. The folks who come to meetings, whether it's a design session, to discuss a scope of work, to discuss a new concept – I instill that passion in them - the desire to want to do more. If you have to stay up an extra 3 hours tonight before you go to bed, let's get this data down pat because we have to implement this new strategy. It is important for us to articulate the details of a day in the life of an emergency management person, or a 9-1-1 operator, or a police officer, or firefighter, or a paramedic to the vendors. At the end of the day it makes a difference in the outcome of that particular project. That's the bottom line.

RM: Jim, what are your hopes for humankind, and how can IT help achieve those hopes?

JA: The human nature of an individual, whether you're brought up and instilled with great values, or whether you happen to be an undesireable, we deal with those folks here day after day. Human tragedy is something that unfortunately is part of our business. It is what it is. We obviously hope that you never have to call us, but at the end of the day, we hope that technology and the technology dependencies that we use today, effects the outcome and quality of life.

Technology is very vibrant. I think that a lot of folks of all ages embrace it. The laptops and wireless networks are in kindergarten classes today, and the mindset of the individual in school today versus 20, 30 years ago is substantially different. I think that technology has brought us a very, an ever changing quality of life, especially Internet in every house. President Obama wants to actually send broadband around the United States - place it out in your less economic developed communities. That is very important. As time goes on, as the years pass, technology is integral to every facet, from public safety to public life, to the private sector, to world-renowned institutions. Everywhere you go you're starting to see more and more technology, and it is hands down a dependency, from telemedicine all the way down to teleconferencing, from universities to a school classroom. It's in every facet of our lives.

RM: Do you see the obstacles to IT in the future as technical or social?

JA: I think from a technology standpoint, one of the things we are facing for example, is mobility. In June of 1997 point-two percent of our call volume was wireless. In June of 2008, it was 60.2%. So with that ever changing evolvement of mobility comes voice over IP and cell calls. The cellular technology gives you a lat, long, and a specific dynamic area of where you are, and that's passed to the 9-1-1 operator. Is there room for improvement? Absolutely. Voice over IP is another huge animal for us, because an IP packet doesn't understand geographical areas. An IP packet doesn't have a GPS header around it that tells us where you are. So if you have a voice over IP service and then place a 9-1-1 call, or use high speed bandwidth, and air cards into a laptop, you can inevitably send first responders to the wrong address, because the actual subscriber information over your voice over IP call is where your bill is going. That might not be where you are on a laptop.

So the challenges are there. Text messaging has taken the nation by storm. Sending text messages into 9-1-1 center is really the next evolution or NextGen 9-1-1. We have to start looking at 9-1-1 messages, pictures, AVIs off of cell phones, all of those mobility aspects aspect will take what started in Haleyville, Alabama, up to where we are in 2009. But the technology evolutions with the cellular build-outs, with the mobility aspects, with air cards that you can place in your hand, or USB drives with voice over IP services, these are all technology challenges that substantially effect what we do here in terms of service providing.

RM: Let's talk about the Jim Argiropoulos legacy. How would you like to be remembered?

JA: I would like to be remembered as somebody who was very passionate, who wanted to make a difference for others, who wanted to effect the quality of life in a very positive way. Someone who was hard working, who never took no for an answer, who never stopped because it was Saturday morning and it was a beautiful, sunny, 70 degree day. I want to be remembered as the person that made a difference. Someone who worked hard, that gave his heart and soul for the citizens of the City of Chicago, and built what I feel is a world class communications center.

RM: James Argiropoulos, First Deputy Officer of the Office of Emergency Management and Communications for the City of Chicago – you are the 2009 recipient of the IBM Global Public Sector Innovation Excellence Award in the Computerworld Honors Program. Thank you so much for your time.

JA: Thank you!