The Custodian of Ideas

Developer Andy Ross came to SAP after contemplating a career in academia. He talks about how passion for ideas has driven his career at SAP.

BY CHARLOTTE OTTER

With four degrees in technical philosophy from the universities of Oxford and London, Andy Ross imagined himself in an academic career, contemplating theory from a college armchair. However, he soon left that dream behind and now works as a developer on the TREX search engine – part of SAP NetWeaver.

After a brief stint as a civil servant, Andy worked as a science teacher in London. Always excited by ideas, he enjoyed teaching his students how physics and mathematics could relate to the real world. In 1987, Andy was offered a job by Springer, the German academic book publishing company, in Heidelberg. He packed up his books and his 10th grade German skills and moved across the channel.

"I have always been comfortable in the German tradition of science and philosophy," he says, "and now I have grown to love life here too – it is more relaxed and more amenable to my lifestyle of contemplative thought and ongoing study."

Contemplating computers from the inside

After 11 years at Springer, focusing on the exacting job of publishing high-quality computer science books, Andy was keen to

Andy Ross at home in his study: His life of learning began early, deepened at Oxford, and continues at SAP

learn more about the world of computer software. SAP was the perfect place to do so. "I saw SAP as a great chance to do something dynamic, and I was intensely curious to know how computers are used from the inside," he says.

In 1999, he joined SAP Active Global Support, where he spent four years. However, with his strong background in theory, he felt that he would be better suited to a development team. He joined the TREX team as their information developer, but his managers soon realized that his ideas and vision needed room to fly. Andy became the team's collaterals developer, preparing white papers, training materials, presentations, and reports. He also trains customers and SAP colleagues and writes the team's patent applications.

"I am a perfectionist," he laughs. "I am exacting about how information is presented." Andy is exacting about information, period. One of his primary roles in the group is to extract ideas from the academic world of math and science and shepherd them into his team's software. He is the custodian of ideas, finding a useful algorithm or a compelling theory and then making sure that these add value to their practical work.

"What I've realized is that as technology becomes more complicated, it is important to have someone who keeps the whole picture in mind."

Celebrating ideas

Andy believes that SAP is a company that celebrates ideas, and gives people the freedom to put those ideas into practice. He enjoys the campus atmosphere, and has joined a physics interest group that meets after-hours to discuss ideas and high-level theory.

One of the drawbacks though about a company full of academics, says Andy, is that it is sometimes difficult to get them to work as a team. Most physicists, mathematicians and computer scientists are loners, passionate and opinionated about their

work, but not overly good at working with others. "Trying to get a group of academics to work together is like herding cats!" he says. "It takes a skillful manager to create a good team."

Andy believes he is lucky in the SAP managers he has had. He describes his present boss, Roland Kurz, as knowing "exactly how to run a world-class team without tripping people up over trivia."

A multitude of experiences

Andy brings many skills from his varied experiences in the working world to his work at SAP. From academia, he brings deep analytical skills and the ability to extract useful knowledge from highly technical literature. From teaching, he brings presentation skills, the ability to think on his feet and the experience of motivating people and setting goals. From publishing, he brings a readiness to craft good copy, and an understanding of the commercial imperatives of balancing time, cost, and quality.

As a habitual philosopher, Andy is ready to share his philosophy of life: "I see SAP as a means to shape the world for the good. As an organization, SAP cultivates and nurtures its employees so that they flourish. And if SAP flourishes, so do its customers and so does the economy."

To make sure he flourishes and keeps fit, Andy runs and swims in his spare time. His home is filled with books, and reading and writing are his great pleasures in life. When he retires from the software industry, Andy plans to write books. "I take my passion home with me," he explains. "I see no divide between what I do at work and what I do at home. It's all about the ideas."

Andy's Top Three Career Tips

■ Be passionate – If you are honest enough to engage your deepest passions, your career will get moving.
■ Be flexible – If you work in a team, be ready to rethink your approach to any task. By showing flexibility, you encourage teamwork.
■ Be a perfectionist – For mission-critical software, quality is the first priority. Never be slapdash.