The 2015 Tech 50

Racers to the Edge

The global financial technology elite sets itself apart by understanding the strategic and societal implications of high-tech advances and pushing innovation at Silicon Valley–like speed.

Grounded as it is in information and money — and information about money — financial services is, was and always will be a technology business. “Good information received in a timely fashion” defined sound banking, the late Citibank chairman Walter Wriston said more than 30 years ago.

But money, banking and capital markets have come a long way from what they were in Wriston’s time, or even a year ago, because technology is advancing so quickly and changing industry and society as it goes.

That is the day-to-day reality for the Tech 50, the visionaries and innovators on Institutional Investor’s annual ranking of financial technology leaders. What sets these executives apart goes beyond their considerable understanding of software applications and system performance as components of corporate strategy. These leaders think big about the global or macro implications of technology-driven change — from cloud computing and machine learning to emerging sensations like the Apple Watch, cryptocurrencies and the Internet of Things. They relate such developments to their organizations’ and customers’ on-the-ground challenges and opportunities; set budget, investment and R&D priorities; and come up with solutions, to use the technological term of art.

And they put a premium on speed and agility. “It’s all about speed to innovate,” says Robert Alexander (No. 24), chief information officer of Capital One Financial Corp.

Intercontinental Exchange chairman and CEO Jeffrey Sprecher, repeating in the No. 1 position, brought his company from nowhere to the top of the global exchange world in part because, he says, “technology enabled us to scale quickly.” It also can fail. ICE’s three-and-a-half-hour outage on July 8 was only the latest to affect a major market platform — and demonstrate the importance of two other differentiating qualities: resiliency and recovery.

Catherine Bessant (No. 2), global technology and operations executive at Bank of America Corp., frets that the technology world at large is “moving at the speed of the consumer, not the speed of the enterprise.” The answer? “The best and brightest talent.” Bessant believes that “in conjunction with advanced-state thinking, financial services is magnetic for tech people.” But that means competing against Apple, Google and other name brands.

The Tech 50 ranking was compiled by Institutional Investor editors and staff, with nominations and input from industry participants and experts. Four primary sets of attributes were evaluated: achievements and contributions over the course of a career; scope and complexity of responsibilities; influence and leadership inside and outside the organization; and pure technological innovation. The top ten appear in the following pages, and full profiles for all 50 can be viewed online at iim.ag/tech50.

Of the 50 entries, 36 return from last year. The returnees’ 2014 ranks are shown, and the rest are designated “PNR” (previously not ranked).

The Tech 50 was compiled under the direction of Senior Contributing Editor Jeffrey Kutler. Individual profiles were written by Kutler; Asia Bureau Chief Allen T. Cheng; Editorial Research Assistant Jess Delaney; Senior Writers Frances Denmark, Julie Segal and Aaron Timms; Associate Editor Kaitlin Ugodik; International Editor Tom Buerkle; and Editor Michael Peltz.
When Neil Katz graduated from Stanford University in 1994 with a BS in electrical engineering and a BA in quantitative economics, he had every intention of going for a master’s in computer science and then applying to a Ph.D. program. Then he got a letter from D.E. Shaw & Co. inviting him to New York for an interview. Katz didn’t know much about the hedge fund firm, which had been founded by computer scientist and Stanford alum David Shaw six years earlier, but he couldn’t pass up a free trip to the Big Apple. “All these senior people met with me, and I was really impressed because they were clearly very smart,” says Katz, who learned to hack as a kid on an Atari 400 home computer. “As a double major I was interested in both finance and technology, and this was a firm that was at the intersection of both, so that was attractive to me.” Katz joined the then-$350 million-in-assets D.E. Shaw as a junior programmer and operations person in its U.S. equities trading group. Two decades later, at 43, he is still with the firm — which now manages $36 billion in alternative and long-only investment strategies — and oversees the hardware and software at the heart of its trading systems and information technology infrastructure. A key to D.E. Shaw’s success is its culture, which emphasizes creativity and values the contributions of technologists, quants and traders alike, Katz says. By working closely with the investment staff, Katz’s team of more than 250 technologists focuses on “building transformative tools” that enable the firm’s researchers to test their investment ideas and trading algorithms using the trillion data events that D.E. Shaw collects daily. “Our commitment to building these tools — which have transformed the way we provide, process and visualize large volumes of data — means that our researchers have been able to run experiments more quickly and get forecasts into production faster than ever,” he adds.

This document is provided for your information only and does not constitute investment advice or convey an offer to sell, or the solicitation of an offer to buy, any securities or other financial products. Furthermore, the D.E. Shaw group does not endorse any information, beliefs, and/or opinions discussed in the document and makes no representation as to their accuracy or adequacy. Please note also the date of the document, as the information contained in it has not been updated for any information that may have changed. No assurances can be given that any aims, assumptions, expectations, and/or goals described in the document will be realized.