

## Nicola Villa

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Talking with Nic Villa is a bit like taking a university-level course in history, philosophy, sociology, and futurism combined. His passion for history gives him a broad perspective on the events of today—and optimism for the future.

It is Villa's concern for the future that fuels the work he does for Cisco Internet Business Solutions Group (IBSG), the firm's global strategic consulting arm. He is responsible for Cisco's involvement in the Connected Urban Development (CUD) program across the world, working with cities such as Amsterdam, San Francisco, and Seoul. With his team's assistance, Amsterdam has launched a number of initiatives aimed at making urban life less polluted, more convenient, and more sustainable. Villa has overseen the development of a Smart Work Centers regional program, facilities located outside the city center to provide connected, neighborhood community workplaces to workers who would otherwise commute long distances, contributing to traffic congestion, increased greenhouse gas emissions, and commuter frustration. He also assisted Amsterdam and several other cities around the world in the deployment of citywide, broadband infrastructures that enables multiple other green initiatives to take place—among many other initiatives that are transforming these cities into cleaner, greener places to live and work.

Villa believes that the world is in the midst of a socioeconomic inflection that will have a transformative impact as profound as the Industrial Revolution in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Calling it “the third age of globalization,” following the globalization effects of the British Empire and the expansion of American influence post-World War II, Villa says, “The established model is being disrupted, and the Internet is at the core of all this. It used to be that either governments or businesses controlled all the energy, all the intelligence on



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a global basis. Today, control is increasingly shared with the people. The real state, the real empire, is the people themselves.”

Information is the world’s most valuable commodity, according to Villa. With global access to information, the world becomes a more level playing field. When questioned about whether this will create a homogenization of culture, he disagrees. “Diversity flourishes where there is opportunity to collaborate and innovate. Historically, whenever societies have closed themselves off, that’s when dictatorships arise. Openness and transparency—these are positive homogenous values, as are democracy, diversity, and freedom of expression.”

He describes what is happening across the globe today as a “perfect storm” of four crises: climate change, urbanization, aging, and the current combination of a financial and economic crisis. “In 50 years, we’ll look back and acknowledge the way information and the Internet and communication have helped us to pass through this storm. There are few times in history that will be seen as pivotal as the situation we are facing today.”

Villa was born in a small town in the hills in the north of Italy. His father, a shoe salesman, had a strong hand in shaping Villa’s philosophy of life. “My father always told me that you should be able to talk to anyone in their own language. Not just in the language they speak, but, as we say in Italy, ‘Talk farmer to the farmer and talk doctor to the doctor.’ This is what many refer to as emotional intelligence. I have always been attracted by travel and international work, because that’s how you come into contact with ideas and lifestyles different from yours, and build mental flexibility.”

When Villa and his sister decided to go University in Milan and needed to pay for their studies, their father had an idea. He set his children up in business in a shoe store in Lecco on Lake Como, not far from Milan. They worked in the store in shifts and earned the money to put themselves through college. “Believe me,” he says, “If you have a shoe shop in a busy area on Lake Como, you get every type of person from all over the world coming in at anytime during the day. This builds up your ability to interact in a very flexible and creative way. Not only were we learning a lot at school, but we learned every day from ordinary people who came into our store.”

From Milan, Villa launched a career of international work and travel. He worked for international consumer packaged goods giant Procter & Gamble in Rome, for a local energy trading company and for Cannondale Bicycle Corporation in The Netherlands, before joining Cisco. After starting in e-commerce at Cisco during the very early years of the Internet, Villa quickly found himself working with IBSG, where, as he says, “I have been able to focus on a new innovative market inflection idea every three years,” setting up IBSG’s operations in South Europe, focusing then globally on government broadband, and now with CUD. With IBSG, he hit his stride, traveling all over the world, meeting many different kinds of people, and working to make a difference in the way people—urban dwellers, in particular—live, work, play, and learn. Villa lives near Amsterdam with his wife and two young children. He speaks five languages (Italian, French, English, Dutch, and Spanish), and his children are also quickly becoming multilingual world citizens.

In the end, what makes Nic Villa tick? “The basic principle of my life is about giving and taking; giving from the people who came before us—knowledge, wealth, life experiences—and then preserving and building on top of this and giving it to the ones who come after us, our kids. This is the quintessence of life. And when you have a job that helps you reach that goal, what more can you wish?”