

Avoiding the Pitfalls

IT project management is a perilous exercise, but one that can be mastered by following certain rules. A closer look with Tudor Ivanov, 37, and Michel Goossens, 34, co-founders of Pulsar Consulting.

It was a Belgian humanitarian organisation that first guided Tudor Ivanov's steps towards Belgium, now more than ten years ago. This electronics engineer, a graduate of the Bucharest Polytechnic Institute, began his career in our country developing chips for electronic games, before being hired by Star Informatic as a developer and analyst, then by Oracle to carry out various assignments at Belgacom. Just as Tudor Ivanov was starting out on his Belgian journey, Michel Goossens had just finished his studies in electronics and business computing and was immediately hired by one of his former professors to do development work for industry. His "dual culture" (electronics and business computing) would soon let him run international projects, notably for Automatic Systems. Poached by Oracle in 1996, Michel Goossens became account manager for Belgacom.

Lack of Transparency

The two men met and discovered they shared the same views on how IT projects should be run. The result: Pulsar Consulting was born in August 1998. Around the cradle: Michel Goossens and Tudor Ivanov, but also their wives, Linda Laebens, a computer scientist, and Anca Mandan, a computer engineer. Objective: custom-built IT project development. The company's activities are built around three main pillars: staff-augmentation project work (at the client's premises), fixed-price project work run in-house, and product development (analysis, prototyping, testing, debugging, maintenance). The company today employs a dozen people full-time, backed up by external contractors on projects lasting six months to a year. The 2001 target is turnover of around BEF 44 million. References include Belgacom, Europay International, Eurocontrol, Fina, Duferco, and others. "One of the obstacles to project management is a lack of transparency. Information doesn't flow well," the two managers observe. Pulsar has accordingly moved into developing information-management software, such as .Gespret, which manages service delivery. In our contacts' view, 90% of failures come down to a lack of communication between supplier and client: imprecise descriptions of requirements, insufficient consultation of end users, poor follow-up, a lack of



Michel Goossens (left) and Tudor Ivanov co-founders of Pulsar.

accountability and team spirit, and gaps in conflict management (everyone hiding behind the contract).

Human Factors

Budget problems often stem from a failure to follow procedures, for lack of coordination between technical management and financial management. "We know exactly where we stand technically, but not at all in budget terms." Hence the value of tracking "spend" as the project progresses. To that end, Pulsar has developed the CPRM tool (Corporate Project Management Consulting). "Designed for Europay, this tool will be reused for other projects after further development. It lets senior management easily compare a project's progress against what was planned." Despite good control from the outset, a project always carries an element of the unforeseen, note Tudor Ivanov and Michel Goossens. "A project is practically always evolving. Every change is another opportunity for costs to rise," they warn. "Limits have to be set on changes, and every change has to be tracked against the budgets and deadlines planned. The practical success of an IT project depends essentially on human and relationship factors. Much more rarely, very rarely, on technical problems."

[François-René Dechamps]