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GLOBAL ATLANTA

Belgian Software CEO Came to Atlanta by Chance, Stayed by Choice

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When **Wim de Smet** left **Belgium** in the mid-1990s, he was a young technology upstart in a culture that valued age.

When the CEO of **Alpharetta**-based **Exaserv** returned to **Europe**, he was head of a software consulting company that had won business from global corporations.

Sure, he was a decade older, but something else had happened in between, and it happened in **Atlanta**.

In 1995, Mr. de Smet was on a European ski lift with one of his colleagues and the CEO of their **Brussels**-based firm, **Argus Integrated Solutions**. They told their leader, a captive audience seated in the middle, that they wanted to take the company's SAP consulting solutions to the American market.

When he obliged, they set out to find a city. With a connected airport and sunny location, Atlanta made the first cut, along with **Washington, Houston, Los Angeles** and a few other cities south of a horizontal line they drew in black across the U.S. map.

But Mr. de Smet's father had one stipulation when he heard his son was going to move: Their new city should have a nonstop flight to Brussels. Atlanta was the only contender that fit the bill.

They hired a president and moved to Atlanta with no projects in the pipeline.

"Arriving in Atlanta and walking from terminal E to terminal C before we realized that you could actually take a train - that is how little we knew about America," Mr. de Smet said. "We didn't even know how big a big airport was."

Luckily, they did know SAP, especially the parts of the software that helped companies streamline their human-resources processes. They made inroads by teaching SAP classes in **Buckhead**, where they met their first client. Things snowballed from there.

"We grew it here to about 180 employees and globally at that point we had 1,800

employees, so I saw a lot of growth nationally and internationally," said Mr. de Smet, who also opened the company's operations in **Canada** in 1998.

In 2004, Arinso had been sold twice, and it began broadening its focus too much for Mr. de Smet, at that point vice president of sales for the Americas.

He decided to go out on his own, going back to entrepreneurial roots that had been cultivated in a college business building and selling more than 600 computers a year.

He crafted a grand business plan for his new venture, hoping to provide SAP's HR solutions to small and medium-sized U.S. companies. It was off the mark, but in a good way. **Whirlpool** became the first client, and every subsequent client was also a large corporation.

"We weren't complaining that it failed, don't get me wrong," he said.

Back to Europe

Exaserv started in 2004 with 12 people working in Mr. de Smet's basement. They graduated to an office in 2007, around the time American clients began asking for the company to work with them in Europe.

When he returned home, Mr. de Smet found that being a Belgian CEO of an American firm was a lot easier than being a young Belgian with U.S. aspirations.

"When I was in Belgium, it was close to impossible to start a company there. When I went back ... all of a sudden it was a lot easier because we were an American company," he said. "They were pretty much looking at us as a global organization."

In technology, he felt that the tendency to look down on the young had changed: "Everybody knew in the technology side that you're not going to do a whole lot necessarily with the oldest guy around."

Mr. de Smet also brought back American model for consulting operations. Rather than setting up a presence in each individual country, he would cover Europe from a central hub in the **Netherlands**. His clients, large organizations that had operated across huge territories in the United States, appreciated the approach.

"They were used to that. It's not country by country, it's region by region, so in their concept the next region was Europe," he said.

Going global through partnerships

Pretty soon, Exaserv was faced with new growth tests. The first was how to reduce costs to compete with larger players who had outsourcing operations in **India** and elsewhere. That quest led them to **Malaysia**, which had cheaper labor, fast Internet and generous incentives for foreign tech companies at the time.

The second challenge was more existential. Exaserv had worked only with SAP's HR systems and had become a reseller of the software. But customers never bought just one piece. They wanted the full suite of SAP's enterprise resource planning solutions, and they needed service. Should Exaserv abandon its laser focus on HR to win more business?

The answer came as a joint venture with **Delaware Consulting International**, a much larger European firm that was struggling in its U.S. operation. Exaserv helped them in the U.S. through the new company, **Delaware Exaserv**, while DCI brought in Exaserv to do HR work for its much larger pool of HR clients in Europe.

They have also worked together in new markets. Exaserv has closed its outsourcing shop in Malaysia and now buys time in blocks from DCI's software developers in **Harbin, China**. That relationship has helped Exaserv compete in new markets like **Australia**, where it could soon open a new office.

Woven throughout the company's narrative is the willingness of its leaders to follow leads and trust relationships, which Mr. de Smet says are keys to success.

"We're not the size of organization where everything is super calculated and everything has to be supported by a 1,000-page business case. We look at it from an opportunistic standpoint, keeping in mind the overall strategy," he said. "The overall strategy for us is to kind of be the **McKinsey** of the SAP HR world, and to do that you have to be a global organization."

Even as it has expanded overseas, the Atlanta market has been tough to crack, as Mr. de Smet says the city's Fortune 500 behemoths have longstanding relationships with the larger consulting outfits.

That hasn't diminished Atlanta's importance to Exaserv's growth. About three-fourths of the company's 75 employees are recruited from **Georgia Institute of Technology** and other local schools.

"I think the No. 1 advantage of Atlanta is Georgia Tech for us," he said.

And, of course, the airport.

After so much practice, Mr. de Smet now knows how to use it a bit better.