

Life at AspiraCon - Six Months In

It is just over six months ago that Ed Naughton interviewed Pat Lucey, former Director of Program management with Motorola. Pat shared his insights into Project Management and revealed his plans to set up a new company - AspiraCon - to focus on Project Management. At the recent IPMI National awards ceremony, Ed caught up with Pat to see how business has progressed.



How have you dealt with the move from a Multi-National to running your own business?

In many ways, there is no difference - the day-to-day business activities are very similar - putting together project plans, meeting and engaging with customers, building proposal estimates and delivering on them, interviewing and hiring candidates, etc - there's no difference there. However there are other ways in which it's completely different, from important things like making sure all the staff get paid each month to little things such as ordering consumables for the printers and photocopiers and trying to keep our website www.aspiracon.com up to date - you very much have to take a hand-on approach to ensure things get done.

How big an element is Project Management in what you do?

AspiraCon are a Project Management Software Development company. Our Mission is to take the Chaos out of Project Management, helping Project Managers to meet their commitments. Our core business is developing software to make a project managers life easier, while at the same time improving an organizations ability to deliver projects successfully. We also provide specialised project management & business improvement consultancy and it has been interesting to see where the demand for this service has come from. We have helped a number of companies who have been successful but who are struggling to make the jump from small-to-medium scale success to get to major success. When you have to scale up like that there is a big danger that you'll lose the attributes that have generated your success so far. If you are a one-site operation of 30 people with perhaps five project managers all within shouting distance of each other, you don't need to build very large project management systems - you can rely a lot on informal communication and the flexibility of a small co-located team.

But if you want to grow that team to 100, spread over a few sites – or countries - and you want to add ten more Project managers into the mix, then you need to put some serious thought into your project management system if you are to be successful. AspiraCon have built a couple of products that we have sold to customer facing exactly this scenario. Project Collaborator takes a lot of the legwork away from the Project Manager, while establishing a great communication and control platform for an organization's projects. AspiraConnect is the other tool we've developed so far - it allows you to quickly map your processes so that you have a process definition which

complies with PMBOK (and optionally a Quality standard such as ISO9001) but the tool goes further by allowing you to simply tailor that process to suit each new project you kick-off, and it even creates the initial Gantt for the new project, using the process linkages and dependencies that have been built up in the tool.

Aren't you meeting resistance from Customers who don't want to add a new tool into the mix?

We've had to target our product carefully to minimise risk for prospective clients. For example - we have no intention of developing a Gantt-chart creation tool and trying to compete with what's out there. Instead we have designed our system to be directly compatible with MS-project server and with Primavera systems, so that our tool augments those products rather than tries to displace them. In fact, as well as the unique functionality that AspiraCon's tools provide, because we have focused so much on providing a very easy-to-use front end to the system, some customers have only started to make use of functionality that their previous solution already had, but was buried in the bowels somewhere. AspiraCon tools take advantage of some of that functionality and make it much more easily available and configurable to the user. This was not a selling point we planned in advance, so it was a pleasant surprise for our customers to get access to so much additional functionality.

Any advice for people thinking of starting up their own business?

Yes - Three things:

First: Listen to all the advice you can get, but realise that nobody is 100% right and make sure you apply your own filtering mechanism to decide which advice you will act on and which advice you will just say "thank you" to and promptly forget. In our case, we got a lot of very good support from the National Enterprise body - Enterprise Ireland. They regularly run a 6-day Enterprise Start course which covers all the basics and which forces you to challenge your ideas and preconceptions. They also cover all the different supports that are out there for new businesses and provide a mentor for follow-up and support.

Second: Assess the risks versus reward. Figure out what's the worst that could happen - then decide if you could live with it. For example if you decide up front that you just could not afford to lose your house, then you have just set a parameter for your business dealings - whatever happens you will not use your house to secure finance – not matter how many times a bank manager tells you it's the only way; there is always another way. Taking a dispassionate view of the likelihood of failure is a tough task to do because an entrepreneur has to be an optimist and be enthusiastic and confident of success. But if you're a project manager, used to evaluating a project's risks, you should be able to objectively quantify the worst-case scenario for your venture – even if you are convinced it will never happen.

Third: Ensure your personal stakeholders are on board. Remember it's not just you who's embarking on a journey - it's you partner, spouse, children, parents, everyone in your family – including the pet! Having the support of those people closest to you will make a huge difference and will give you a well of strength and support to draw from when times are tough. And they're the people you should splurge on when times are good!

What's next on the horizon for AspiraCon?

We were lucky enough to be announced as the winner of the Best International Emerging Company after the Munster regional final in the All-Island Seedcorn Business Competition 2007 organised by InterTradelreland's Equity Network. The competition received almost three hundred expressions of interest from ventures all over Ireland and is open to companies operating for less than 5 years. As we have existed for only 6 months, we didn't expect to do so well, and we are

looking forward with fingers crossed to the National final. It has been great to get recognition from the industry that what we are offering is unique and valuable. Apart from that we are up to 15 employees and 8 customers – our plans are to manage controlled growth of both those numbers by focussing on the UK and Ireland market for the next 12 months, before expanding to the US in 2009. Our immediate challenge is to continue to deliver first class service and products to our customers, and to make sure we don't fall into the trap of growing too quickly and diluting the quality experience we deliver to our customers. I hope I can give you an update in 12 months that will be as positive as the first six months have been!