

Community Talk with: Philippe Letellier

Panache – noun: a stylish, original and very confident way of doing things that makes people admire you (Cambridge Dictionary definition).

After 12 years, Philippe Letellier has decided to hand over the reins of his Vice-chairmanship of ITEA. “Change is important, and no-one is indispensable. This is the right moment for ITEA and for me to find a new impetus.” So how can you best describe Philippe, for many the constant factor for the past 12 years, in the field, on the stage and among friends and colleagues? As many have witnessed throughout the years, Philippe has always seemed to be a natural on the stage. I think a fitting word to describe him would be to say he has always done things with ‘panache’. But before finally relinquishing his duties, how does he look back on his time at ITEA, an organisation that has become almost synonymous with his name?

Destiny

“In some ways, I think I was destined for my role within ITEA. At a very early age I was keen to learn about advanced physics and when I was 14 or so I read Einstein’s theories of relativity as others might read the bible. I have always been interested in the impact that technology can have on the world and so I decided to take an MBA degree to complement my computer science degree and PhD. This decision was a game-changer in my career. I have worked in

start-ups, large companies and academia, so I have gained a good sense of where priorities lie and how these three worlds operate. This has been very useful for me in my ITEA role. I remember being asked by Gérard Roucairol 12 years ago to replace him as Vice-chairman,” Philippe recalls, “and to this day I am still grateful to him for giving me such a wonderful opportunity to serve in this role, which is geared towards ensuring that the projects deliver real impact.”

Operational guy

In addition, Philippe has also been a member of the ITEA Presidium, which is responsible for defining the ITEA strategy in collaboration with the ITEA Board, and he praises the level of creativity that constantly generates renewal and new ideas. When asked whether he ever wanted to become Chairman, Philippe replies, “For me, the Chairmanship is not a better job. It’s a different role. Ego and hierarchy do not come into it. Our strength is as a team. And our team reflects our strengths. As Vice-chairman, my role is more oriented towards the projects. The Chair is more oriented towards the programme. The two roles are complementary. I am an operational guy and Vice-chairman suited my qualities.” Even though this meant being away from home on a regular basis? “Indeed, this is a role in which travel is an integral aspect. I spent more time on the road than at home, that is true. Despite this ‘burden’, I had a unique opportunity to get to know new people, discover new technologies, businesses and markets.”

Multicultural

Philippe cites another unique aspect of being part of the ITEA Community when he says that he has never worked in a more trusted zone. “I have realised that you never need to fight your corner but that you achieve a lot by cooperating. And by doing this, you learn new things week in, week out. I have to challenge myself to stay ahead of the game and challenge others to achieve even more. In this way we enrich our knowledge and our intellect. I have gained so much more understanding of how to manage R&D projects so that they deliver impact in the market. The methodologies that I set up within ITEA will certainly pay dividends in my consulting work. Furthermore, I must mention the multicultural dimension. For a Frenchman, it is not always easy to work with the Dutch, Germans, British or Turkish, for example. Big differences exist in the way we engage in relationships. Sometimes you can feel offended but you exercise control over your emotions and, bit by bit, you begin to understand that others have different ways of doing things. It has been a real challenge for me but I have had a good learning environment within ITEA. I am much more aware now about the nature of these cultural differences and understand how you can use them in a positive way. This is what happens in ITEA on a daily

basis. And you can see it in some fantastic projects where consortium partners from different countries and cultures come together to produce impactful results.”

Beautiful projects

Philippe is reluctant to single out specific projects, saying that to do so would be an injustice to all the projects that have had so much impact. However, when pushed, he does cite two: SembySem to provide a software system dedicated to the monitoring

and management of systems of all sizes using semantic representations of their constituent components. The project results provide dynamic representations of ‘systems’ as a set of semantically-described synchronised views, and MODELISAR, which introduced functional mock-up (FMU), a next generation of methods, standards and tools to support collaborative design, simulation and test of systems and embedded software. “I thought SembySem was very clever, very abstract, developing an ontology to describe the security rules and





solutions. A very beautiful solution because you solve the complex problem of interoperability and go a step further. Many subsequent projects employed the same approach in different domains. And now the SotA for interoperability is to use ontology. Another very impressive example is MODELISAR. Not only did Daimler ensure that the doors of its cars shut with a noise that was very distinctive – you could hear that it was not a little Fiat, for example – through the interoperability of different simulators but the project became the germ for the generation of a full set of success stories in the automotive sector worldwide. Even more beautiful! I can tell such stories all day long but for that I would need a whole magazine to myself! But, in any case, these two projects simply highlight the amazing achievements that the ITEA Community produces year in, year out.”

Magic formula?

Is there any kind of magic formula? “It may seem like magic sometimes, but it’s not really. First of all, we are technology lovers. Secondly, there is a clear target: to impact the market. That’s key. Give people a strong ambition. In the risky environment of innovation. Then align this with an ITEA Office that is interested in the content, and the people realise that they, and what they are doing, are important. They matter. And this is a powerful driver for happiness. This notion of happiness, pushed so hard by

Rudolf (Hagenmüller) some years ago, is a value that the Community shares and which binds us together. It helps create the trusted zone I spoke of earlier. If you want, you could say that the ITEA formula has something magical about it since we do seem to pull technology rabbits out of the hat on a regular basis.”

Freedom to innovate

And, as Vice-chairman, have there been any specific developments over the past few years that are likely to shape the landscape for your successor? “Customer focus is certainly a significant shift. It’s always been a part of the make-up. After all, ITEA operates a bottom-up approach, led by industry needs. But more recently we have made customer focus more explicit and customer workshops are proving to be real eye-openers. Innovation, as I said, is a risky business and companies can be hesitant about entering this zone. But the digital transition has made it imperative to innovate. So we need clever people with brilliant ideas who can dream beautiful solutions to problems before they even exist. Strategists don’t think this way. They create frameworks and, by doing that, put a straightjacket on innovation. I am convinced that we have to allow the innovators full freedom. A successful innovation for me is a good balance between innovative technologies,

clear market vision and value chain evolution. By understanding the latter, you can propose innovative solutions. This is fundamental to our approach in ITEA, and we must not lose sight of this.”

New game

But the time has now arrived for Philippe to focus on his own future, consulting for companies and making good use of everything that has helped shape him over the past decade or so. “It’s an exciting time ahead. It’s a new game. I’ll also have to plan my time differently.” Indeed, Philippe has spent the past half year in Rennes, like most of us, working from home – a far cry from 12 years of ‘roaming’ Europe and beyond in the service of ITEA. “I am grateful that my wife and family have accepted me back into the home from which I have been so absent for so long,” he says, tongue-in-cheek. “Corona has coincided with my shift of direction. It’s a time of change and reflection, a new adventure. Time to look forward to new challenges, and maybe a little bit of time for me to indulge more in my love of theatre and acting.” With panache, of course!