

Community Talk with Jos van Sas

The delights of being on the circle's edge

A pivotal year in Jos' career was 2002: not only did he join the Research & Innovation department of what is now Nokia Bell Labs, the innovation engine for Nokia, but he also took his seat on the ITEA Steering Group, where he still is proudly representing Nokia to this day and celebrates his 20 years of membership. A perfect opportunity to reflect on his business adventure and his path to ITEA.

A brief resumé: Although Josephus (Jos) van Sas was born in the Netherlands in 1964, at six months of age he moved with his parents to Belgium. Jos studied Electrical Engineering at the KU Leuven, gaining his PhD degree in 1992 following a four-year research project at the very large-scale integration (VLSI) System Design and Methodologies division of imec. During this period he gained a taste for collaborative research in the European Strategic Programme on Research in Information Technology (ESPRIT). In 1991 he joined Alcatel as a VLSI test engineer. In 2002 Jos continued his career with a step to Nokia Bell Labs, the innovation engine for Nokia. He is currently Director of External Affairs for Nokia Bell Labs Belgium and oversees the management and the coordination

of R&D projects, playing a very active role in regional, national and European policy making on science, technology and innovation.

Broadening the scope

"Just a note to add that I also did an MBA after I began working at Alcatel. I did not learn a lot of management skills at university, and later I came to appreciate the management insight I acquired in my current position as Director of External Affairs where I am responsible for everything related to funded projects. My work takes place in a collaborative setting – with academia, customers, suppliers and so on. In fact, throughout the growth and change over the past two decades, I count myself fortunate to have had the opportunity to continue to develop my work in this field.

Looking back to when I was doing my PhD," Jos recalls, "I remember meeting some of the brilliant minds of Nokia Bell Labs and could not imagine that fifteen years later I would be part of that group. Six years ago my scope within Nokia Bell Labs broadened beyond the Belgian borders to take in collaboration with academia all over Europe. So, what I do today with respect to funding embraces the Nokia Bell Labs network worldwide. But despite this extra responsibility, as it were, I am still very much committed to my role in the ITEA Steering Group."

Casual coffee moments

Jos finds his role in ITEA very appealing "because it's bottom-up, industry driven and very flexible in the sense of bringing people together during events like the ITEA PO Days." Jos is disappointed he





was unable to make the ITEA PO Days in Helsinki this September due to the contraction of COVID within his family. “On the other hand, the COVID-19 ‘era’ has also shown us how we can adapt. Meetings have been able to go ahead, albeit online, and goals have been achieved. This is true for our industry in general and of microelectronics in particular – and within ITEA. The collaborative spirit is still going strong although it’s the casual moments – at dinner and the coffee machine – that are prominent by their absence. These are the moments when ideas are sometimes generated, and relationships cemented. It’s no secret that, despite all the travel restriction gains for the environment and the wallet, we all miss these moments.”

Changes are inevitable

Over the past 20 years Jos has seen many changes at ITEA, first and foremost in respect of the professionalisation that has taken place in the processes and procedures. “In the beginning the evaluation process, for example, was rather lightweight, with just a matter of six or seven

criteria and no more than a couple of A4s. With Philippe Letellier as Vice-chairman for an extended period came the development of a more rigorous and refined process. Another change I have witnessed,” Jos says, “is the expansion of the ‘family’, with quite a lot of comings and goings. At least I have good company in Medur Sridharan who, like myself, has been around for more or less the same time. But every organisation needs fresh impetus, new visions and perspectives to maintain its dynamic. So, in that sense, change is a good thing. It provides a nice and necessary healthy internal balance. Then there’s the funding, or rather the streamlining of the funding decisions. Not something that ITEA can really influence but it is worrying to see how certain countries and companies that were strong participants early on have become absentees due to a lack of public funding. Of course, two highly visible changes have taken place in recent years – the new Cluster Programme format and geographical expansion beyond Europe., like the Eureka Clusters AI Call and the

integration of project participants from Canada to South Korea. This expansion has led to real win-win situations, from both a cultural and technological perspective.”

Serious hobby

It’s certainly a much-changed landscape from 2002 and managing that complexity is a real challenge! But I can also say that I have had a lot of pleasure from ITEA in these two decades. Being on the edge of the corporate circle rather than inside it in my capacity as Director of External Affairs,” Jos explains, “has given me the opportunity to interact with the ‘outside world’. Going to other parties and players to see how they work and learn from them. ‘Not invented here’ is my motto. It brought me to ITEA in the first place and not only has it enriched me personally but my organisation, too. It also keeps me at the forefront of the latest state-of-the-art. I see my Steering Committee role as a serious hobby, borne out of desire not necessity.” Long may it continue.