

Community Talk with:

Stefan Van Baelen

From 'ancient' Commodores to innovative captains of industry

Stefan Van Baelen is Funded Project Manager for Digital and User Centric Solutions at imec in Belgium, the world-leading research and innovation hub in nanoelectronics and digital technologies whose groundbreaking innovation covers application domains such as healthcare, smart cities and mobility, logistics and manufacturing, and energy.

Commodore and Pascal

Stefan is a computer scientist by education whose PhD was in model-driven engineering just over ten years ago. "At the time I did my PhD, the topic of model-driven engineering was still predominantly an academic one whereas today you see its application in a whole range of industry sectors. As such, that's a good example of the transfer from academic research to industrial use." Computer science and Stefan Van Baelen go back a long way. "I can't remember when I wasn't interested in computer science and I can certainly recall my first computer, when I was in high school – the Commodore 64! With some Pascal programming

in high school I felt that this was the direction for me to go."

From researcher to coordinator

"Interestingly, it was when I started my PhD, nearly 20 years ago, that I got involved in ITEA too. Quite a commitment, I must say – and it meant that I took a little while longer to finish my thesis than I had originally anticipated." At the time Stefan was a researcher at the imec-DistriNet research group at KU Leuven, a software engineering research centre with extensive expertise in secure software engineering and middleware for distributed systems.



Bottom-up, industry-driven

“It was then as a researcher that I came into contact with ITEA since it was part of my job to coordinate European projects in the ITEA programme. I think to date I’ve been involved in eight. These projects, with a bottom-up, industry-driven approach, appealed to me because I’ve always been interested in how research results are applied in industry. One of the companies with whom I’ve had a lot of contact is Barco, a familiar face in ITEA consortia. When academic and industrial innovation come together to achieve practicable results – well, this is when I feel proudest of what I do. Solving industrial problems rather than depositing hypotheses in an academic ivory tower.”

In 2012, though, Stefan took a slightly different track, switching to iMinds, where he was appointed research coordinator, responsible for setting up new projects. In 2016 iMinds merged with imec, resulting in a large research hub and combining hardware and software. “And that’s how I came to be at imec,” Stefan explains. “where we have two kinds of project:

government or publicly funded and contract research projects that are funded directly by industry. So my job is to set up new funded projects and find new opportunities, taking responsibility up until the point at which a project gets approved, and then I step out. I am, if you like, the project pipeline from idea to the labelling of it by ITEA.”

Broader mindset

Going back to the beginnings of his involvement with ITEA, Stefan says that this is largely down to Barco, which proposed a project in the very first ITEA Call. This was DESS, a project aimed at improving capabilities for handling complexity and boosting productivity. It ran from 1999 to 2001. “It was a real challenge and opportunity at the same time. ITEA gave us the chance to work with industrial players and other partners from different European countries. This was something new at the time. It helped broaden my mindset and underline the desire I had for my own research to be industry-driven. I also think that ITEA is a good and important counterweight to the top-down European Commission programmes.”

A community that matters

Stefan helped to set up a number of consecutive ITEA projects, so he is quite well positioned to make observations on the various developments that have taken place at ITEA. “It has been a fascinating process to witness how this organisation has grown from its early tentative days to become the mature, well-oiled machine that we see today,” Stefan recalls. “The ad-hoc of the early days has become a sharply defined, streamlined procedure nowadays. From the professional office support that project partners receive to the much larger events that are organised, like the DIF last year in Amsterdam and the various PO Days. You get a sense that you are part of a community that matters, that has impact. You feel you get the chance to work on the topics that matter to you as a member of that community. And sharing it among the community. This openness is one of the secrets of ITEA’s success, I think, especially in a world that is changing and developing so fast. Being ‘open’ in all senses of the word is key to adjust to the needs and demands of the community. And this is something that will stand ITEA in good stead for the future. The global dimension is a trend that is also being reflected in the ITEA Community. We are growing geographically, but while we welcome other countries from all parts of the globe, it is important that we take the time to integrate them properly, get around the table and get acquainted.”

The human aspect

From a personal point of view, being part of the ITEA Community has enriched Stefan’s life in various ways. “It has given me the opportunity to work with so many different people, players, cultures, nationalities and industries. But perhaps the most important thing, from a personal perspective, is the human aspect. Getting to know people, having fun when doing the project – it is a big motivator. I remember at the end of the AGILE project when all the partners paid a visit to the home of Santa Claus in Finland. We had so much fun sending Christmas cards from there and playing around in the snow. So a job well done was a job celebrated together.”