

Gerard Spans, Chief Information Officer ARCADIS NV:

“Manage IT like a business”

Interview: Hans Wichink, Managing Director Energy and Utilities, RGP

The introduction of Gerard Spans as the CIO put Arcadis, a consultancy and engineering company, on a different course with its IT strategy. The spearhead ‘process excellence’ was added to the existing objectives of efficiency and cost control. All in the service of growing the company. “My basic question is always: what can IT contribute to the value chain?”

Gerard Spans is a man with a mission. He is passionate when outlining the IT organization he envisions in five years’ time within Arcadis. Also in the interview with Dialogue Magazine. This is quite exceptional as Spans very rarely gives interviews. He indicates he is not interested in drawing attention to him personally. “I am not looking for a spot in the limelight.” Spans definitely has a global focus. Much of his time is spent in workshops travelling from one international Arcadis office to the next. His Dutch is full of English terminology. “Actually, I am no longer used to speaking Dutch”, he says, with a slightly apologetic tone.

Prior to joining Arcadis, you were the CIO for Rexam in London, a company focused on consumer packaging. A very different work area then Arcadis’ playing field.

Spans: “But also extremely interesting: Packaging is the first thing that the consumer is confronted with. Furthermore, Rexam was just recovering from a very difficult period when I stepped in. For me, in this situation, it was a great challenge to step in with the idea: ‘what can IT do here?’ Initially, it was about bringing efficiency, leading to cost reduction. I regard that as a sort of life cycle management arrears: you design it once and copy it to 160 plants. But of course, going beyond that is in my nature. There is a natural lower limit to wanting to produce a coke can as cheaply as possible. Adding something to the value chain is the next step. This requires a partnership with the business and strong market orientation to add something to the customer strategy. By pioneering with IT, we eventually directly contributed to the customer experience. In my opinion, marketing is a skill that is an absolute requirement for CIOs in the future.”





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How did you then end up at Arcadis?

“Well, just how these things go. People in the network know you, you are approached and persuaded to come work for this company. A new strategic IT plan had been prepared that was in particular focusing on efficiency and cost control. That is not surprising if you realize that IT has shown excellent results in just that throughout the years. Upon arrival, I explicitly demonstrated the leaders in the business that we aim to be active in Arcadis’ value chain in strategic terms. In the original plans, nothing was mentioned about a theme such as process excellence.”

Can you explain the content of Arcadis’ IT strategy?

“The starting point: we want to operate worldwide as Arcadis; that is what are objectives are geared towards. A core element in this respect is process excellence: bringing the best of Arcadis to our best customers. This means Arcadis focuses on effectively and efficiently working based on designing harmonized processes, shared work routines and a common language. Also in areas that we are very good at already, such as project management, we are striving for an even higher level. Using talent management, we invest in our people. Furthermore, we are investing in knowledge sharing with knowledge management. In that context, I like to talk about embedded knowledge: no project is concluded without sharing lessons learned and best practices in the organization. This is where my past experience with Accenture is brought in: the discipline to share knowledge is at an unrivalled high level there. In the context of knowledge management, we also focus on what we call role-based planning. In reality, this means that it is not John or Pete starting a job; instead, we deploy competencies from our worldwide organization on locations where these competencies are required.”

How can you open up minds for this new strategy?

“By introducing a different way of thinking. People always say that IT is an enabler or provides support, but that is not how I perceive it. For me, IT is all about collaboration, that is the key word. All our IT people have a physical operational base, but in my vision, the work is delivered in communities. In part of our organization, we introduced this way of working, and people experience the benefits, they pick it up at their initiative. This is how it should go, in my opinion, I am a leader, not a manager. I consider myself a destination planner, someone who conceives the structures. Within Arcadis, two communities are now active: in the field of IT support and Connectivity. People in my team independently determined that these fields should have the highest urgency. Another shift is thinking in IT services rather than IT tools. What we need are global solutions, not local facilities.”

Deployment of IT plays an essential role in Arcadis’ growth strategy. Previously, people said that Arcadis mainly needs acquisitions to be able to grow.

“I happen to prefer looking to the future rather than the past. Future growth should for a large part certainly be autonomous. We focus on growth per region and growth where it fits demand. However, Arcadis will also continue to grow through possible acquisitions, primarily focusing on acquiring interesting and relevant competencies. For newly acquired companies, IT will continue to be delivered in the region. And we will share innovative thinking about IT deployment; we do not have to reinvent the wheel every time.”

Do you find you need to slam your fist on the table?

“No, really I don’t. I manage to get the message across; people understand the course. Please don’t think I am riding roughshod like some cowboy. I operate within the existing governance, fully interact with all Arcadis business leaders... My mission is to keep the concept of our IT strategy alive.”

And if this strategy is completed in five years’ time?

“I have been working here for nine months now and I am really enjoying myself. The people working on IT are picking up the strategy and the top of our organization has huge confidence in us. So in the future, if I ever look back by way of exception, and I detect that the job is done, perhaps I will start doing something else. I’m not sure what that will be. I worked in different sectors, I may choose the unknown once more. Whatever the choice, my basic question is always: what can IT contribute to the value chain? My credo has not changed in many years: manage IT like a business.”

Gerard Spans and ARCADIS

Since 1 January 2013, Gerard Spans (1966) is the Chief Information Officer of Arcadis, a consultancy and engineering company, formerly known as Heidemij of Arnhem. In the capacity of CIO, a new position Arcadis introduced upon his arrival. He is in charge of the IT organization of the company consisting of four business lines respectively focusing on water, infrastructure, the environment and buildings. Arcadis is active in more than seventy countries, divided into four regions: the United States, Europe, emerging markets and the Netherlands (the home market). Spans steers an IT team operating on the principle of local delivery, global leadership. His previous employers include Rexam, Philips, Sara Lee and Accenture.