



Entrepreneur at heart, François Gonin travels between Lausanne and Singapore

Two years ago, François Gonin founded Impactus SA, a Swiss business consulting firm based in Lausanne and Singapore. Between the exciting projects he accompanies, his close-knit team and his many professional trips, entrepreneurship fits him like a glove. For Socialize Magazine, François Gonin shares his daily life, which makes him vibrate and some wise advice for budding entrepreneurs.

In January 2016, you founded Impactus SA, a Swiss business consulting firm. How was the idea of Impactus born?

First, the recognition of a certain need within my network and second, a desire to no longer have employee status. I was approached by several acquaintances about to launch an event project, a startup or even an association in the cultural or sports field, and each time, the same questions came out: how to structure themselves, how to manage investments, what about taxation, how to make themselves known, etc. More and

more, the questions spilled over into areas that were beyond my competence. In my surroundings, several people benefited from different skills but complementary to mine. We decided to group several services under the same roof with the advantage of being a human-sized company.

What's your background? Were you predestined to start your own business?

I did a Master in Law in Freiburg and specialized in *Business Law* in Hamburg but I did not necessarily want to become a lawyer. I worked in a cantonal bank, in the corporate tax department at one of the "Big 4" in Lausanne and then in a Family Office which essentially managed the affairs of a family active in several sectors. During these experiences, I had a rather critical mind on how to transmit the corporate culture to employees and on management decisions based on purely economic aspects and not human enough. I couldn't be so critical and stand still. So I wanted to see if I was able to do better according to my own criteria, without comparing myself to others, but to be at peace with myself about how to manage a project or a company.

How did your business develop afterwards?

Basically, I wanted to go it alone but I came across the right people at the right time. Several of them settled with me in the offices I had found in Lausanne to also launch their business. I was selective and chose who I really wanted to work with, then we all started under the same "Impactus" banner. The team is made up of a core of 4 people but it can grow to about twenty depending on the projects.

Impactus offers strategic business consulting, marketing and communication solutions. Can you give us concrete examples of activity in each of these areas?

We present ourselves in two different segments: business consulting and marketing & communication. For example, we coordinated the transformation of the Caprices Festival from a multi-music festival to a 100% electronic festival. We worked on digital communication and social media management to reach a younger audience. Still in events, we worked on the music festival of the city of Lausanne where we produced all the supports such as posters, Facebook page management, etc.. The aim was to

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rejuvenate the image of the music festival and make it accessible to everyone, even those who could not participate physically.

Concerning our *business consulting* activity, we help our clients to structure their company, to raise funds, to protect their legal rights, etc. We position ourselves either on the side of projects or startups, or on the side of investors or *business angels*. Another example, we accompanied *Stairlin*, a startup whose vocation is to facilitate the life of micro-enterprises and entrepreneurs, by offering them a platform accessible 24 hours a day to make appointments more easily, help them with administrative follow-up and soon an integrated payment solution, basically a personal assistant. We have assisted them since the first day when they presented their idea to us, then in the creation of the company, fundraising, etc.

You say you know how to keep a low profile and that your clients appreciate it. What does this mean in concrete terms for them?

Discretion is very important, especially for Swiss and Asian clients. On the investor and *business angel* side, many clients do not want to show where they are investing, for several reasons: to remain discreet about their wealth or avoid associating their name with a project that might not work. On the other hand, the person who invents a product in his garage and does not dare to talk about it for fear of having the idea stolen, asks us for absolute discretion until the idea is protected, by patents for example.

What advice would you give to all the companies in the process of being created? What are the steps to follow, and those that must be followed?

Discretion is very important. You have to talk about your idea to get an external point of view, but you have to choose the people you talk to. Then, define the structure of the company, the type of company, whether or not you start alone, and do not skip the daunting steps like administrative procedures. Having a solid structure reassures potential investors. Of course, it is always possible to fix a mistake but it can be expensive and complicated. We have seen a huge amount of business plans where costs and duration were underestimated. Finally, define the partnership rules, to guarantee a harmonious relationship between partners.

Is Switzerland an ideal country for business start-ups?

Switzerland would have everything to be, but today it is not the most favourable country because here it is "expensive" to launch its startup. The Federal Council is discussing solutions to lower the burden imposed on a startup, but we are facing aberrations like capital tax where entrepreneurs should theoretically pay taxes higher than their income. It's absurd when you start a startup and create jobs. We still have binding administrative steps today, but Switzerland is on the right track. There is a desire to be more competitive with our neighbouring countries or Asia, which are at a much more advanced stage on this point.

We feel a strong tendency to create our own structure? For what reasons?

The new generation is more independent and does not want to be chained to a company with which it shares neither the same culture nor the same philosophy. Entrepreneurs and young people who have made their fortune also make people dream via social networks and convey this image of success that makes them want to. We notice that this trend mainly affects marketing and communication, or fintech.

Impactus has a subsidiary in Singapore. For what reasons?

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We have had several mandates in Asia and we decided to move to Singapore because it is "the Switzerland of Asia". The people are discreet and the financial system is almost equivalent to the Swiss system. We are thus close to our customers and can be more reactive, in particular because of the time difference.

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Do you often travel as part of your activity?

Yes, last year I spent 183 days abroad! We are a young company, if there is an opportunity abroad, we don't argue and we go.

What are the aspects of your daily life that you particularly like?

Working on warrants I never thought of. Within the company, what I like most is that we are a young team, we all have lots of ideas and we share them. We debate every day about new ideas, to find out if we are embarking on this or that project. It's a *contrario* a little frustrating sometimes, because we want to be everywhere, but we have to select them and avoid being too scattered.

Over the past two years, what has been your biggest professional challenge?

The most incredible experience was a mandate I had overnight. In early 2016, when the sanctions against Iran were lifted, a client called me to help him with an investment project in Iran. Two days later, I found myself in the middle of a country I didn't know, working on a project in the middle of the desert for several months.

What is your greatest pride?

The harmony within our team and the fact of having created this work environment while having the constraints of a young company. Finding the right people, making them compatible and everyone pulling the same rope. Impactus is a team, it is the most important part for me and I am proud to see what we have achieved.

What are your hobbies that allow you to recharge your batteries?

I like sport in general but especially mountains, climbing, mountain biking, trails, etc.. I impose myself time slots during the week and every weekend I am in the mountains. To completely disconnect, I organize each year a two-week trip in "backpack" mode ideally without a phone, or as little as possible.

What advice would you give to all young entrepreneurs?

Anyone who starts his business will necessarily have his head in the handlebars and I was the first to have blinders. The first advice is to look up, to listen to those around you who realize how we sometimes feel. Finally, have an external point of view and be open to criticism even if it is difficult.

The World Cup is all we're talking about right now. Which team are you supporting and what is your prediction for the final?

I am more focused on ice hockey having been a young player at the Lausanne Hockey Club for twelve years, but I love the atmosphere of football. Of course, I support the Swiss team! In the final of this World Cup, I would prefer to avoid having an "already seen " and to see two small nations compete against each other, moreover Switzerland is one of them!

What future do you see for your company?

We are confident for the future and are already working on 2019. My priority is to expand the team by favouring female profiles. Secondly, to become more international and open a new subsidiary in the Middle East because economically, it is a region that is very active.

More information at www.impactus.ch.