BOLEO - (Business Opportunities in Lasers and Electro-Optics)

The workshop that changed the Israeli hi-tech scene

Joe van Zwaren

It took place in December 1992 at the Hilton in Tel Aviv, as a satellite workshop to the 8th Meeting on Optical Engineering. But little did its organizers know that this workshop would revolutionize the Israeli hi-tech scene by ushering in a new way of promoting entrepreneurs to potential investors. This workshop pioneered the American way of start-ups promotion and fund-raising to Israel. It was organized with an entirely different purpose, for funding for Russian engineers and scientists to do projects.

In 1991 500,000 Russian Jews had immigrated to Israel, with a very high number of scientists and engineers. The cream of Russia's scientific and engineering force came to Israel but they overwhelmed all the abilities to find gainful employment. Furthermore, these professionals came from a system where the State took total responsibility for finding work for its workers and there was little initiative among them to find work in Israel.

The 8th Meeting on Optical Engineering was the professional meeting which was the lead optical event in Israel and part of a series of annual conferences in Israel in the field of Electro-optics and Lasers, organized by the Israeli Association for Engineers and Architects. The two day conference would have an attendance of between 400 to 800 professionals with several parallel professional sessions with a technical exhibition. This series of meetings was started by Dr. Rami Finkler and M. Barak, at the time in ELOP, in 1981 and one of its chairmen was Engineer Itzik Shladov.

Dr. Moshe Oron, the chairman of the organizing committee for the 8th Meeting on Optical Engineering, decided that this conference will help immigrants finding jobs in the field. Thus, immigrant scientists were invited to attend and give talks. Workshops were held on how to find work, how to write a CV and taken on tours by Russian speaking professionals, such Clara Reshef, from IDF, throughout the conference to meet possible employers, tour the exhibition and the BOLEO workshop. Joe van Zwaren, from the Israeli Ministry of Science had suggested organizing a business workshop during the meeting with the purpose of matching Russian scientists to potential investors, based on the American model, that he had come to learn about. Dr Adam Dvir, EORD, was adamant that the workshop could not be restricted only to Russians. Joe was chosen as the BOLEO chair.

The 8th Meeting on Optical Engineering organizing committee, with all their enthusiasm for helping immigrant professionals was shocked at holding a business matchmaking workshop at a professional conference. BOLEO was organized a parallel workshop within the 8th Meeting on Optical Engineering – in one of the smallest halls.

When the BOLEO workshop started, ALL the participants of the Optics conference tried getting into the small room and the conference was moved to the Hilton's dining room. Seventy seven presentations (50% of the initial entries to the BOLEO workshop) were chosen and covered areas such as medicine, components, imaging, materials, industrial equipment, sensors & detectors. There was little immediate deals but some of the projects grew into companies such as Colorchip (telecom), Oridion (bio-med), SHirat Hayazamout (Optics start-up fund), Raicol (Nonlinear Optical Crystals), Trellis (Ultrafast Optical Switches). Advent corporation created with Discount Gemini, the first venture capital fund, headed by Ed Mlavsky. In the after mate, many other conferences were modeled after the BOLEO workshop and the BOLEO workshop served as part of the process that made Israel into the Start-Up Nation. BOLEO was instrumental in bringing a new culture on how entrepreneurs would market themselves to investors.

The events that lead to BOLEO

Joe van Zwaren had created at the Ministry of Science with a Russian refusnik immigrant, Victoria Vaksman, the project KLITEX. It consisted of a database of Russian immigrant scientists and engineers, using the then nascent Internet technology. The database at its peak had 10,000 engineers and scientists and had succeeded in finding 1,000 jobs in the Israeli hi-tech.

By the end of 1991, in every town in Israel, there was volunteer organization giving first aid to the immigrants arriving there. These volunteer organizations would pick out the engineers and scientists and put their information into the database. The Klitex project would send them a PC computer program which would allow them to write up a 2 page CV in English, focusing on their achievements, 5 best patents, 5 best papers, latest degree and latest place of work. In the form, the scientists could indicate if they had any projects and gave the option of providing the description of their best project. Uziah Galil of Elron and Elbit, had given his blessing to this project and got the entire electronics industry to support the project. If a person needs an engineer, he would e-mail or fax what he was looking for and the Klitex database would send him back the 10 most eligible candidates.

With such a supply of innovative scientific and technological projects, Ed Mlavsky, director of the BIRD (Bi-national Industrial R&D) fund introduced Joe van Zwaren to several key investors and entrepreneurs in the US to explore acquiring funding for them.

During November 1991 Joe van Zwaren went on a visit to the US and met a universal lack of interest in the projects. Dana Edel-

man, the CEO of the NEICC (New England Israel Chamber of Commerce) from Boston organized meetings with local entrepreneurs to interest them in investing in these projects. Joe got the same response; that Israeli did not understand anything of entrepreneurship. All that Israelis presented was the science and the technology, what investors wanted was a business presentation. They requested a teaser which would present in no more than one page: the technical opportunity, the business model, the team, what the investor was required to invest and what would be his returns. It was shocking for Joe van Zwaren who got such a rejection from the Boston business community. But along the way he met the founder and head of MIT forum who suggested of using the format of making introduction between entrepreneurs and investors like it was done in Boston.

Dana Edelman suggested to Joe van Zwaren of organizing such a workshop in Israel and that she would time it with the Massachusetts governor's mission to Israel, which would take place December 1992. While NEICC was showing Israeli government how business entrepreneurship was done, the Israeli ministry showed NEICC how Internet could be used to enhance business networking. Hundreds of business people and scientists were involved in the flow of information and many of the matches were made before the event.

The 1992 Massachusetts Trade Mission was headed by Governor William F. Weld with finance giants such as Peter S. Lynch, from the Magellan Fund from Fidelity Investment, Clinton Harris, senior vice president, Advent International Corporation, Joseph Kruy, president and CEO of Cambex Corporation, Albert Cohen, chair & CEO, ESSCO (Electronic Space Systems Corporation), and senior executives from Ratheon, Teradyne, Bank of Boston, the leading CPA and corporate law firms from Massachusetts.

Joe van Zwaren is Leviathan Energy Ltd. marketing manager, and holds responsibility for strategic partners.

Mr. van Zwaren received his M.S. in Physics from the Universite Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) in the field of high energy physics .

As Director for Exact Sciences at the Ministry of Science and Technology, he was responsible for a revolution in Israel scientific funding by promoting synergetic multi-group research, for both the Ministry of Science and the Ministry of Industry and Trade (Magnet).

In the nineties, he ran a successful Optronics and Microelectronics research program with an over 40% success rate technology transfer to industry. Nearly fifty optical communication companies resulted.

In 2001 the Israel IEEE awarded him for this pioneering work.