How to overcome social distancing – between engineers

At this year's World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in Davos, it wasn't even an issue, but then it hit the economy with full force: Coronavirus went around the world. How has the engineering & construction industry been affected? Ajit Joshi, Managing Director of ITandFactory GmbH (Bad Soden, Germany), answers our questions.

Mr Joshi, how have you experienced the past few weeks?
I tell you, these are dramatic times. Here in Germany we have hardly come into contact with the coronavirus. You could only really follow what was happening around us on TV. The situation is completely different in the US, where ITandFactory also serves customers. At the beginning of April, there was a great deal of uncertainty there about what the population might face. But when I spoke to our customers in Detroit, Boston or New York, I realized how bad the situation is there, because each of my contacts knows someone who was directly affected by the pandemic, either in their own company or in their family or circle of friends. I know from discussions that it really was there. In New York, for example, the whole city was affected. That is very different from Germany.

ITandFactory also has locations in India – what is your contact to India like?
The corona cycle in India started late compared to Europe. However, owing to the high population density, very restrictive measures were then taken to contain the spread of the pandemic. There was a very strict lockdown. Thanks to our comprehensive digitalization in advance, we haven't lost any productivity, either in India or at any of the other sites.

Has the relationship to your customer base changed under the influence of the pandemic?
Yes, we realized a change in the deployment of our end-to-end solutions. We recognized a very good demand for our products.

Many of our customers have realized that they have to change. By the way, this is a fact that we have all become aware of. Far too much of our working environment is characterized by physical encounters. The need for increased digitalization has become obvious, not only for more 2D and 3D processing but also to support collaboration. I tell you, our customers were keeping us very, very busy.

What was your part in that game?
We were able to respond very quickly to the wishes of our customers, each customer having very individual needs. One thing everybody has in common is that they all want to work remotely without coming to the office. As a consequence the whole engineering workflow has to be changed. The good thing about the Covid-19 crisis is: You have to change – there's no other option.

Was it easy to keep in contact with your clients?
Globally, at the beginning of March, we observed some signs that something could happen. That our customers wanted to work more from home. Thus, we had to change our infrastructure. We offered VPN-based licenses to work from home, in some cases, even free temporary licenses so as not to interrupt their workflows. Most of our customers were able to become very productive after a short while and for that, they are very grateful to us. They had no costs for extra licenses.

Well, you can no longer communicate face-to-face with the clients. So, what have you done to keep them from being left alone?
Every month we are releasing a detailed newsletter with very technically oriented content. We have also started a new initiative called the 'tipps & tricks' webinar. It has become very, very popular and a lot of customers have attended. Many customers have given us feedback telling us how happy they have been because of our support.

We acted very quickly and proactively. I can tell you, our office was not locked down for even a day and our business has been running all those weeks. We conducted several all-employee meetings and also meetings with our customers virtually.

Have you been able to derive offers for the future from these crazy times?
Yes. In fact, the demand for online services is great. So, actually, we are developing more online training. And we released a new version of our plant design suite Cadison – in last December it was R19, in April R19.1. Moreover: Our customers are now updating to the new release very fast.

I think you are now inspired to make enhancements within the Cadison framework. Can you give us any insights?
Sure. Last year, we brought to market a new P&ID stand-alone product based on the Microsoft Visio technology. It has been very well accepted. Around August this year we shall come up with our third release.

Visio is available in two versions, professional and standard. In the upcoming release we will also support Visio standard technology. And at the end of this year, we will bring the next major release of Cadison to the market, release R20. With this we will be moving forward in the direction of BIM and making a very streamlined IFC format available. Meaning that file size is no longer a big issue. And, by the way, our next annual customer meeting, the Cadison International Conference (CIC), will take place completely digitally.

Thank you for these insights!
Interview: Bernhard D. Valnion

ITandFactory GmbH, a 100 percent subsidiary of Neilsoft Ltd. (Pune, India) – is a solution provider for plant construction, which has been developing and selling engineering software worldwide for over 25 years. The company is based in Bad Soden am Taunus, Germany. The engineering software Cadison supports clients in project planning and development for plants in various industries. These include, for example, the chemical, pharmaceutical, food, beverage, oil and gas industries as well as water and wastewater treatment.

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