

An Interview with Unifaun CEO Leif Bohlin

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After a year as Unifaun CEO, Leif Bohlin has grown into his new role. His mission is to accelerate development and growth and establish the company as the leading European player in Cloud Delivery Management and TMS. The way to get there is through acquisitions, organic growth and high-performance teamwork.

Leif Bohlin focused his career with more clarity after reading the legendary book 'The Machine That Changed the World - The Story of Lean Production', which was published in 1991. The book was written by three MIT professors and is based on Toyota's philosophy and model for Lean Production. In 1992, Leif and his student companion Jerker read the book and were overwhelmed.



Leif Bohlin, Unifaun CEO

We decided to take a study trip to Japan and the US and then write an essay on Lean Production as a conclusion to our studies at Handels in Gothenburg. In order to finance the trip, we contacted several companies and asked for scholarships. One of the companies we contacted was SAAB Automobile and their purchasing director Bo Andersson. Bo declined our request but offered the possibility of getting a job after the trip, says Leif Bohlin and laughs at the typical toughness that, among other things, distinguished Bo Andersson and his successful career in the international car industry.

Study trip to Japan and USA

Despite the negative answers, Leif and Jerker managed to get funding from elsewhere and made their study trip to both Toyota in Japan and MIT in the US. Once back home in Sweden, the recession had hit, and unemployment had risen sharply. The freshly graduated Economics students contacted Bo Andersson at SAAB to accept his offer.

The following day we went to SAAB in Trollhättan and got a job immediately. The desks were empty because a large part of the purchasing organization had been laid off as a result of Bo's extensive change in the purchasing organization. During the years at SAAB and General Motors and at Bo Andersson's school, I got to learn about the whole supply chain from scratch. I learned to think from a processes and process development aspect, about structured purchases done by the book, and negotiation and international business acumen.

Attracted to dot-com

In 1995, after several educative years at SAAB, Leif Bohlin became a management consultant at Kearney and also at Carta Booz Allen Hamilton. He was then asked to join and build up a software-based dot-com company in purchasing and procurement, a company that would later be named IBX.

At the turn of the millennium, I was contacted by a former SAAB colleague, who worked as a purchasing manager at Ericsson. He talked about an e-procurement software, Click-to-Buy, which they had developed at Ericsson, and asked if I wanted to join them and set up a company that would build a business around the new purchasing platform. I was attracted by the possibility of building something new and IT-based, and around 2000 it was the coolest to start a business within dot-com i.e., activities based on the internet. We were early with a completely SaaS-based business model where we delivered our system as a cloud service, says Leif.

“Started with the customers and the revenues”

At that time, there was a dot-com hype in the business world, and there was almost unlimited risk-averse capital. Investor, Ericsson, and SEB invested a lot of money in the start-up that eventually became IBX Group, and the then CEO of Investor became chairman of the company. In other words, everything was rigged for success.

The dot-com bubble burst, but we still did well, and gained a positive upside when the business community started to focus more on costs and on structured purchasing and sourcing. In addition, ours was a kind of reverse journey compared to many other dot-com companies. Contrary to the prevailing principle, we built the business gradually, with focus on expenditure, and made sure to get customers and revenue before we established ourselves in new markets.

Fast consolidation

The company's strong Nordic reference customers included IKEA, Volvo, Skanska, Novo Nordisk, and Fortum, as well as many others. After a few years, IBX had built a strong position in the Nordic region, and the focus was on the rest of Europe, where acquisitions and new establishments were made in Germany, England and France. In 2007, Leif Bohlin was appointed CEO of IBX Group, and soon the next stage was to either continue to acquire or be acquired.

We had succeeded very well in internationalizing the business. But players like SAP, Oracle and IBM ran the industry consolidation hard. We began to realize that we were part of something much bigger and in 2010 IBX was sold to French Capgemini.

Internationalizing IT and service companies

Leif Bohlin continued to work in IBX even after the sale. Quite soon he was appointed head of Capgemini's Supply Chain Practice and was part of the management team of the global business area for Business Process Outsourcing.

I appreciated the global experience of leading a great service business during my years at Capgemini. But after several years of intensive travel and a lot of focus on politics and internal processes, I longed for a smaller and more entrepreneurial business and decided to quit, explains Leif.

He did, and quickly landed in the next stage of his career, when in 2014, he became CEO of the Swedish IT company eBuilder. The IT company was facing a major change with a need for strategic development, quality development as well as refinement of a wildly grown software-as-a-service, SaaS.

“Unifaun is a fantastic company”

At the time of writing, Leif Bohlin has been CEO of Unifaun for almost a year, a company that he is grateful to be leading towards new ambitious goals. With a career path that is characterized by change management in supply chain and IT / digitalisation, he seems to be a perfect match for the job.

My positive image of Unifaun has been strengthened during my first year as CEO. Unifaun is a fantastic company with a wonderful culture and competent employees and in an industry that is changing and developing intensively. At Unifaun, many things already work really well, but then my challenge becomes even more exciting because it is a matter of continuing to grow a successful business and make it even better and faster.

Leif Bohlin says that more than 100,000 corporate customers have created more than 250 million shipments in the Unifaun Delivery Management system during the last year alone. The customers range from small companies with the need to manage transports efficiently, to large global players, who want to increase their visibility and cost control in the logistics supply chain. An example of the latter is the Norwegian Orkla Group, which has just chosen to implement Unifaun's TMS globally in its operations.

E-commerce is driving development

With the recent years' strong growth in e-commerce, e-retailers and consumers have also become a hugely important target group for the entire transport and logistics sector. Against this background, Unifaun has developed the application Mina Paket (My Parcels) together with some of the major transport companies on the market. Mina Paket has become popular quickly and has been downloaded by more than half a million consumers.

We offer solutions that both help e-merchants increase revenue and give end customers an optimal delivery experience. With the app, e-commerce consumers can keep track of their deliveries, and e-merchants can market themselves throughout the delivery process. Another example is our service Unifaun Delivery Checkout, which gives e-merchants the ability to give their own end customers the freedom to select where their purchases are delivered. This flexible checkout option increases conversion and satisfies customers.

Guiding a teenager into adulthood

Leif describes his current role as guiding a well-behaved teenager into adulthood. With that allegory he means that Unifaun is now making its way into the world, where the company should strengthen its position and grow further both organically and through acquisitions, in a way very much similar to IBX.

At Unifaun, we will now accelerate our growth, strengthen our Nordic position as a leader in Cloud Delivery Management and TMS, and become a European market leader. In order to succeed, I work a lot in developing business and leadership management, and in giving managers and other employees more power to make their own decisions and work towards clear goals.

Nordic management

Leif Bohlin regards himself as a typical representative of democratic Nordic leadership, which gives employees more responsibility and independence to make decisions and pursue their tasks, what is in English is known as 'empowerment'.

I see myself as a coach who frees the strength of the team, and isn't a bottleneck or brake. For me, this type of leadership is natural, and I think it's needed in the phase that Unifaun is in now. To move on and achieve our high goals, it's important to get the most out of the whole team. Many entrepreneur-driven companies reach a level where management risks become a bottleneck. When a company is at a certain stage, you need to start handing down the decision-making power and work with information and target management in a different way. We're right now in the middle of the process where we need to accelerate and be able to act quickly in a dynamic market.

Growth focus

From the start, Unifaun has grown constantly each year. Now that pace will increase significantly in certain segments where the market is growing rapidly. Growth should take place both organically and through acquisitions. So, don't be surprised if we soon make an acquisition, says Leif Bohlin with a smile.

We're facing a very exciting journey of growth. We currently have about 200 employees and are now going to take a big step forwards and transform Unifaun into a European market leader.