

VPP003 How to make it to the C-level with Kamil Kozłowski

Daniel: First of all, Kamil, I would like to say that, you know, it's great to meet you again. So it's a really great honor for me to talk to you and to see what you have achieved so far together with your teammates. When I've looked at your LinkedIn account, coz that was the main source of information for me and the main source of idea on this episode, I would like to understand what was your role within the business, within Unisystem at the very beginning and how did you end up actually running the company.

Kamil: So I hope it won't be too complicated answer, because the way, it's pretty simple, at least as I see it today. Of course, if we just talk about things that just happened, they were very regular. So I started as a Field Application Engineer. Actually, I needed a display so I called this company and then the owner, which is my partner in business right now, said: "Ok, I cannot answer all of your questions, but actually, I am looking for an engineer, maybe you would like to work for me?" And that how it began. But later, I have seen that with a proper technical help we were able to sell much more. And then, I was starting to think what if we will do not only problem solving with the display, but maybe our own design, our own solutions to the display. And I figured out a few things that could be done and I was surprised, which is I think pretty common – that you realize that there is a simple solution, but you see that nobody is doing that, and you start to wonder why, and sometimes the answer is "just because" – nobody's doing that because nobody's seen this before. And I've seen a few things that we could do with display or touch and we used this and it worked. So we did a bigger business and then I talked with the owner that said: "Okay, we can do it, and maybe move it forward, because I see a potential in this but I would like to be, of course, a part of it." So then I've become like a business development manager and then I knew, at least for myself, that I'm on the way to be a partner of this company and this is the only way that I see that I can be fully involved. And Sławek, who is my partner, agreed that if we achieve certain goals and develop the business to certain level, then we can discuss really realistically to become a partner, which happened in 2015 actually.

Daniel: So how big was the business when you actually started?

Kamil: Okay, it was four people in office and one warehouse guy, so totally five people and then I joined, so pretty small. And in terms of revenue, maybe I will not talk about direct numbers, but from that time until now, so it's eight years already, the business grew ten times. And we have over thirty people right now, so it changed a lot and the company focus changed from just distributor, that is selling, we call it buy and sell or moving boxes to the solution provider, so that is something different.

Daniel: So if you would summarize this, and I can probably help you with that, by adding more value to your customers the company grew organically.

Kamil: More or less yes. Finding better solutions, of course cheaper, because it's very important, better in terms of quality, usage, manufacturing. Maybe I will also go back to your question because you asked how, and maybe not only to the people that are in a technical field but in general – you said, how to do it. I would say just work very hard and do not look at anything else. If you don't like your boss – just work hard, you don't like your company – still work hard. You work for yourself, even if you will change the company or something else, you always work for you. I sometimes see people that resign very fast. I had people here that I offered them that “Maybe you will become a manager but right now I would like to send you to this managing course and I would like you to read this book and try with maybe one article a day, like technical, because you need to gain the knowledge, understanding and maybe try to help other people first and then we will discuss” and most of them say: “Okay, I will try”, maybe a week later they resign or some of them even say “No, no, no, first I want the position and then I will go to the course and lose my private time,” because most of this things you need to do in your private time to develop yourself, so there's a lot of people that actually don't want to do it or will pretend that they want to do it, but actually they are not interested. They just want the salary and position.

Daniel: So your suggestion would be to just to work hard.

Kamil: Work very hard.

Daniel: And keep focused and this is how you...

Kamil: Don't think about rest too much, focus on your goals.

Daniel: That's true. So, in a few sentences, just tell me your current role as a vice president of operations – what does it involve, just in general in the company, running thirty plus people at technical company?

Kamil: So basically, because I'm a technical guy, so I'm also like CEO of the company, so technical director, so my role is the site operations, also developing or at least managing development of new technologies that we are implementing in the company, but daily, yes, I do a lot of tasks that are connected with operations of the company. Because when the company changed from five people to thirty five, then it's completely different. Maybe from thirty five to hundred twenty five would be similar, but the first ten, twenty, thirty people are required to build the structure. And the structure needs to cooperate. Then you have departments, you have different managers and this is my role to keep it all together, so to glue everything and to make sure that the people that used to be engineers are now, maybe, the managers, will work with other managers and other teams. I also do a lot of financial things; I'm quite good at it, so because we don't have a finance director, this is my role as well – to analyze the data, to analyze the cash flow and everything. So this is my role as well.

Daniel: Quite a comprehensive skill set is required to actually do all the three roles. You probably work quite hard.

Kamil: Probably, but I don't work that many hours, especially when my daughter is nine months right now, so it changed my private life, so I cannot work that hard as I used to, but still, I try to be like ten maybe sometimes longer hours per day. But before, as I said to you, work hard, I usually spent maybe fourteen to sixteen hours even a day, before I become a director, and I didn't know if I will. So most of the people don't want to do it. If you ask them to stay ten hours they say: "No, you know, it's too much, you need to pay me more" or "What's there for me," or "Are you sure that I will be a director?" So I wasn't as well and still, I wanted to do it. So I usually started at six o'clock or seven and then I spent like nine or ten even before I had the family. So it is a lot of work, but as I said, now I don't work that much in terms of hours. But I am extremely lucky with the people that I have here. So I have a few really, really smart and hard-working people.

Daniel: So if you would summarize what kind of skills are really required to be in your position right now? If you have to run a company like that, what are the key things you have to keep in mind on daily basis: is it communications or is it something to do with finances?

Kamil: Finances is just the base – you need to be sure that you are safe, that there will be money for salaries, money for the goods and the cash flow will be okay. So this is like the basic stuff you need to do, but this is not enough. So what you need more, is, I would say the most important part would be to have this vision what do you want to achieve maybe in three to five years and then to find the right people that will do it with you – you will not do it yourself. Even if I will have thirty people, like regular people, I won't be able to manage a great company that I think Unisystem is. So, very important skill is to find the right people, which is also a skill I would say. I have done hundreds of interviews and I found only a few people that are able to help you really develop the company. It's not that simple that you just find the right people and they will do everything –you need to work with them as well. But I would say the other way, without the right people, you will not be able, even if you are the best manager, you need to find motivated people, you will not want unmotivated people.

Daniel: Okay, so maybe let's jump into something else. Looking at the profile of the company, it's quite obvious that you guys deal with quite a lot of businesses globally and I've noticed that quite a lot of suppliers you deal with are obviously from Far East. I think it's a very interesting topic and it's interesting for me – that's why I think it's going to be interesting as well for the audience. What kind of barriers or what kind of difficulties you find in dealing with companies from the Far East? Because I think, and this is as well from my experience, it's not that easy and you have to have some kind of methods of working with them. How does it work for you guys?

Kamil: Of course it's not that simple, so you need to have these methods, as you mention, how to communicate with a different culture. Because even if we both use

English, in many ways the thinking is different, so you need to have these methods for daily work to keep the conversations effective. Let's say with Chinese company you can exchange emails for a month and nothing will be solved. So you need to find special ways how to communicate with them to really, really do it fast. So if you, for example, want to ask five questions, you should point them out clearly in your conversation – you cannot just put them sentence after sentence, because you will get the answer only for one, and in most cases, the easiest one – for them, of course – and the rest, especially the hard questions, they always skip. So it's like very simple stuff that you need to understand how to do it, because if you won't, you will lose the time. So you need to put like five points maybe an underlying “please, answer me point by point and do not skip any of above” and still you would get one question answered anyway sometimes, but it's better. What I would say is also important is if you want to work with the big players in Asia, you need to show your value here, I mean Europe, for example, that you really are able to bring big customers and solve some problems that you will not be only, as I said, company moving boxes, but really a company that can improve their, let's say, product to be implemented in the market. So they produce something like a display but actually the company in Europe cannot use just the display, the company here needs maybe a display and a touch that will work together but you have two suppliers – one is for the touch and one is for the for the TFT. And if this customer will buy them, they will be responsible to make them work together, and if something will be working not as good as it should then you don't know who to blame or is it the TFT maybe making too much noise or maybe it's the capacitive touchscreen not handling the noise enough. And if it's like Unisystem, connecting together, then our engineers will work on that, yes, so we work on the firmware of the touchscreen usually, to make them work properly and then we'd guarantee that it will work. So that's why this TFT company and this touch company say: okay it's great to work with Unisystem because they solve the problems and they are responsible to implement. So you need to show your value and of course, working with Asians, I think it's pretty common knowledge, it's very important to know in person the high management of the company, they really appreciate that. So you need to visit them, you need to shake hands, you need to have this dinner, you need to talk, you to make this almost private relation. For them it's very, very important.

Daniel: Okay, so on the note of discussing business with far eastern countries, what would you suggest to companies looking for suppliers or business partners in general. What are the key factors to keep in mind and how to actually get a good partner? I think that is probably the same thing with employees, good employee means you can drive the business, good partner means you can actually drive the business.

Kamil: So, I would say that with the business partner in Far East it could be even easier than with employees. So the method is very simple – you need to find lots of them and visit them all. Prepare the checklist. What you want from them and then go from factory to factory and check and then evaluate, think, and maybe go back again and this way you can learn how they differ from each other, which one will be better for you. I would say that it is impossible to just sit there, google some companies and

say “Okay I've I have found a good partner”– maybe. Maybe you have luck and it could work but I would recommend you to go and visit as many companies as possible. You can visit sometimes maybe six to ten a day. It doesn't need to be long visits every time. It could be like half an hour, one hour to just see and have this first impression and this way you will learn what you really want and what they can offer, because it is completely different than in Europe. So if you are a person who never worked with Chinese companies, then I recommend you to go and build better understanding what's there, because it's different.

Daniel: Absolutely. So would you consider it as a risk if someone would try to cooperate with a far eastern company without actually knowing them in person, if they want to grow their business by using supply from Far East?

Kamil: Absolutely. There is a risk, quite high, especially if you really want to use their product in your device or your product that you want to implement on the market later. There is plenty of risk from quality to supply chain and the lead times they will offer later, stability of the product - I mean the life time - and the prices as well that are very important for you if you want to run the business based on the components from the company. So yes, there are a lot of risks and it's important to check what are you working with before you really start a business. I would recommend maybe to order samples of something from each company, maybe to go through some design process together, even demo phase of some design together, and pay attention to every detail: how fast they respond, how good was the sample, how it was packed, how they work. If they only reply you during the day are also doing the late evening hours which is crucial sometimes, because many Chinese companies or Asian companies work late hours, but not all of them, and those who are, usually are much more, let's say, dedicated reliable and then you can still work on maybe Saturday, they will help to solve the problem.

Daniel: So, let's assume that you've got a partner. How would you manage him? Is there a standard process you have implemented to do that? What practices you used to actually keep that corporation in good manners so all parties, including your customers, are getting what they want?

Kamil: I would say the daily communication is very important – to keep an eye on them, what they do and if they receive their order, if the order is confirmed, if they have materials, when they want to produce it, how they want to produce it. So to not leave everything to them but to control this, as much as possible. Of course, if you have partners that you worked many years and you have no problems and you know very well how they are organized inside and you are happy with their own organization, then maybe you don't need to control that much. But normally, I would say controlling them is a key factor to decrease the risk of the cooperation. I consider Unisystem as a responsible party, so I want my customer to sleep well and to say “I don't worry at all because I ordered this from Unisystem” and the guys there worry a lot: how and when the goods will be done and if they will be on time and with the proper quality, etc. So we try to put on our staff as much as possible to leave the

customer free from doubt. So to keep the good corporation is to keep control, so – trust, but control at the same time. Like I said close in daily, even daily, communication, maybe some regular visits – they don't need to be like every month – a yearly visit usually is enough, but they should also know more of your people, not only the highest management, but also the people like your logistics people or engineers etc. So it's also good if the people know each other on different levels and then they can work much more effective later. The Asians become friends very fast and very easily and they like this other methods of communication, not only official mail, but also like calls or using WhatsApp or WeeChat online.

Daniel: It seems like it is really different from country to country, from nation to nation. I think it's great that you have nailed the methods to cooperate and build relations with Far eastern companies. Now, let's maybe talk about something a bit more relaxed. I'm curious what would be the next big change in the display industry and I've put that question on my list on purpose, because you can see quite a lot of changes in technology, like, always, for the last twenty, thirty years. Every year, every month you hear about something new. Is there anything big coming in?

Kamil: The question is more related maybe to the consumer kind of company. We are mainly in industrial or semi-industrial and here in our part of the business of the display business the changes are not that fast and they are usually not very, let's say, welcomed even. If you manufacture industrial device you want to manufacture it for ten or sometimes fifteen years and you want the same display. So even if I would say "There is a new technology and you will have this enhancement," usually the answer is "No, I want the same because this one is already tested EMC and everything is done I don't want a new technology." So in the business that we work it's not that important and we do not even try to follow the latest display trends that are in the consumer market, that you have this full double wearable displays right now, which is the next big thing for sure, so we will not even try to use this kind of technologies because they are very unstable and rather not available for the industrial business. Why? Basically, because of the timing - for the industrial project you need maybe two or three years for development before you'll put it on the market and then you want to produce it, as I said already, for many years. And for consumer products you have maybe three or six months development of the new phone or something like that and you want to manufacture it for a year or two with a huge quantity. Those guys are companies that are creating a new display technologies, they, of course, focus on a volume first, so they want to make this foldable display and they want to first put it into the foldable phone or something like that in a device that will be produced ten million per month and they are not interested to put it in some industrial applications. We could probably find industrial applications for the foldable display but maybe we'll be able to sell, I don't know, a hundred, thousand pieces per year for some device that will show you something and you'll put it on the hand. Probably useful, but the quantity will be too small to justify the cost of development. So I would say that industrial market is maybe five to ten years behind, depending on the technology behind the consumer market. The next big thing or a thing at least in the industrial is e-paper. So e-paper is a well-known technology on the e-book market like kindle and

this kind of devices. It was developed by E Ink, basically to replace the paper, the printed page. The first market were e-books and only recently, maybe from two years, E Ink is opening for new markets so beside the seven or six inch displays or nine inch that are designed for e-book, they manufacture right now also the bigger screens that are intended to be used for maybe public information systems or bus stop, to replace real posters or maybe to put like a big time table on the metro station that will look like a paper, but will not be a paper, it will be e-paper. And right now we are developing these technologies, we are E Ink representative for Central Europe and we are working with them on this kind of technologies. But maybe three years ago even or five for sure it wouldn't be possible, even if the technology of the e-paper five years ago was mature in a kindle etc., but it was not available for industrial.

Daniel: So does this mean that we will actually get industrial devices with E Ink displays or maybe devices which will...

Kamil: Industrial, semi-industrial yes.

Daniel: So do they have colored ones?

Kamil: Yes, they do, but the real color ones are on the way, let's say. I have seen already the prototypes, they are amazing, but at the same time very slow, so you need to wait, I don't know, maybe two minutes to refresh. The effect is amazing but the cost is huge right now and the temperature range, as I remember, is like ten to forty so it's completely indoor – you cannot to use it anywhere outdoor, so the real color is on the way. What we have right now is basically black and white or black, white and red or black, white and yellow. There is one screen that is color, four thousand ninety six colors, but it uses color filters not pigment. So actually the display is black and white but some of the pixels have filters and the light that is reflected goes through the filter, so if you make it white and there is a red filter you'll see red pixel, more or less. But the colors, they are not saturated.

Daniel: In our conversation before the interview you've mentioned that the most interesting part of your work lays around the development of new technologies and it is actually quite interesting that you've mentioned also that you are bringing the most difficult manufacturing processes back to Europe, back to Unisystem, back to Poland. So developing new technologies and manufacturing in Poland, that's quite rare. I don't know. Is it difficult? What advantages you get by doing that and why don't you just hand over everything to your good partners back in Far East?

Kamil: Okay so first thing. If I would hand over everything I will have no value. But it's not only this reason. The reason is that I see that we, as a European citizens, have much better understanding of how something should be done to be useful for European people and how like engineers from Germany or Italy or Spain whatever would like to have some problems solved. So we have the same mindset and the communication is much easier, and also from the simple things, the time zone is quite important, because if you work intensively on the project that maybe you spend

a couple of hours a day on communication, which is not possible with the Asian company. Also, the physical distance is important because even from Gdańsk you can fly to almost any city in Europe in the same day. So I have some visits that I do in Germany or Italy that I go in the morning and I come back here in the evening and then I spend the day with the customer or our engineers or our sales people. I think it's very important to have this close communication. So if somebody tells: "Oh, it will be okay to work with Asians and do not see each other too often." It's actually not working in practice. People need to see each other to have the object in hand, the same object that they are working on, and talk together to have this thought shower, we don't use brainstorm anymore you know probably. So you have to have this thought shower to really develop some great ideas, how to solve it. So after you design, then you want manufacture it, and again, even if you have the really good designs, all the 3D files etc., still, there will be some problems or issues with the manufacturing. So if you just hand over this to the Chinese manufacturing company, again you need to communicate a lot, discuss everything, because even the best design, if it goes to the production, there are some changes. You cannot avoid every problem of the design in a way that it will be a perfectly manufactured later. So this part also we bring to Europe. We have our own manufacturing facility where we do assembly, so as I said before, we are in industrial or semi-industrial area so you are not doing huge quantities that are in the consumer market. So maybe thousands, ten thousands, hundred thousands, but still is nothing compared to maybe ten millions of phones that you need to manufacture per month. So you can create quite effective manufacturer in Poland, for example, where the labor cost actually is still low and right now, we measure this quite often, is very comparable to the Chinese labor cost per, let's say, assembler on the assembly line. So our costs are not higher, so why to have the factory there if you can have it here and you can control it much better, and the customer can come here and work on the process review every day. So, especially at the beginning of the manufacturing of the new design, it's really important. But most of the projects, if they will not go into huge volume, they stay in Europe, so in our factory, or sometimes we use our partners', together with the customer, so not necessarily in Asia.

Daniel: So, if you would tell us one more thing about the actual technology you're developing here, what would be the most innovative thing you're working on right now, which is something you can share with us, obviously. What would be the most interesting thing you can tell us about?

Kamil: Okay. I would say that there are at least a few of them. Of course, all of them are connected to the display or touch technologies. So from, maybe starting with the display, there will be intelligent displays, so the controllers, or maybe the software later, will be making the developer job much easier. So you don't need to work with the bare display but you can work with a display that has this intelligence inside that can do certain tasks itself. So this kind of things; but they are usually related to the lower volume projects. And then, with maybe higher volume projects, what we recently developed were controllers for capacitive touchscreens. And, of course, they are made in Asia, I mean, in a very good way. But what we have here is to add just

every parameter very fast. So normally if you send it to Asia, they need maybe more time, it takes longer and we have developed our own ways how to do it really effectively. So our, let's say, development cost is much lower, so we can achieve the same result maybe in two or three days that are made in Asia maybe in weeks. And it's again related to the firmware or special software to tune all the parameters that are required for the touchscreen to work later properly. Other things are like mechanical parts also, so we do a lot of mechanical assembly here but this is maybe not very technologically complicated.

Daniel: Maybe last thing before we finish, because I think it's super crucial, especially when we put into context what you said at the beginning. Do not stop learning, do not stop developing yourself, even if it's not your final praise.

Kamil: But you said that in the beginning. You should find a point where you should stop and start to work. So, of course, you need to do both and never forget to work. Sometimes it's better to try and fail a couple of times than to maybe read ten books and find this perfect way you – will not find the perfect way this way.

Daniel: So, what would be then the latest thing you have learned? The most recent piece of knowledge which builds up to the family of skills you've got right now, which heavily impacts what you do with the company and for the company?

Kamil: Okay. During the years I've learned a lot of different things but maybe the most recent would be to act really fast. So you have to find the conclusions and implement them really, really fast. So maybe you have one or two cases and based on them and based on very limited information that you have, you need to make a decision how to make the next step and you should do it very fast and you should not spend too much time thinking what will be really best, but you should really implement what you know immediately. For me, extremely motivating is a thing that the time is limited. Not only my lifetime, but also like the day, and the week, and the month, etc. So it's very important to push something, some progress, every day. So I would say that this is very important, so to work hard, as I said, but also work very fast to really see that you are doing only the steps that are moving you forward. Do not waste time on the other things and do not waste time maybe thinking too much if something is good or bad. Just, maybe, spend two, three minutes thinking and then do. One way or another.

Daniel: Do you make decisions on your own or do you collectively just make the most crucial decisions based on what you just said?

Kamil: So most of decisions daily I try to make on my own, simply because I don't want to waste other people's time, but I value their opinion very much. So, if the decision is a little bit bigger, I always try to gain other opinions that I value, but they will have different point of view and then to make a decision. But again, I try to keep the discipline and make it as short as possible. A decision should be made in the same day to be also responsible for the timing, because it's easy to say "Okay I'll

make a decision and take a month, gain all the data and then have a clear answer, from like a spreadsheet. Put everything there and the answer will be calculated what is better.” In many ways you need to just make a decision and you don't have information.

Daniel: And I guess that's a very important skill when you have a big team, when you have a very interesting business. If it's electronics, if it's any other business, I guess that's very universal skill and I think, as you just said, it takes time to probably develop it, but it's crucial.

Kamil: I always consider myself as a manager and I think every manager is a decision making machine. So you make a decision based on the input that you have and in many cases, you don't have enough input and still you need to make a decision. So with time, you are able to make good decisions or very good decisions based on really limited information. So maybe we can call it guts that you have this feeling, but actually there is nothing like this. It's really the knowledge and experience, which we all later call guts or something like that.

Daniel: Great, Kamil. Thank you very much. It was a pleasure not only to talk to you but also see the company. Thank you for the quick tour, it was great to speak to you and I really think that the discussion was very informative. I really think that quite a few people may listen to it in some time and recognize your advices, you know, as good advices for them, for themselves, for their businesses.

Kamil: I would be very happy.

Daniel: So I hope that you've enjoyed the interview, thank you very much and yes, it was great to see you and congratulations.

Kamil: Thank you.