# VPP004 What is Business Development with Szymon Chlebowski

**Daniel:** Okay, it's great that you've accepted my invite, Szymon, thank you very much.

**Szymon:** My pleasure, Daniel, I'm so happy and excited I can take part in it.

**Daniel:** We've met in the UK when you were doing some consultancy work and I was almost immediately drawn into your energy; I'm not quite sure where it's coming from but hopefully, after that interview I'm gonna know a bit more about you and a bit more about where all the positivity comes from. When I first thought about creating a podcast, I knew that I wanted you to be in it, so please say hello to the audience and then tell us who you are and what is it that you do, Szymon.

**Szymon:** Hello Daniel, hello everybody watching us or listening to us, rather. As I said, it is a big pleasure for me to take part in your initiative, I feel very excited about it. And then a few words about myself. So I represent the generation which has grown up in a country located on the wrong side of Iron Curtain, which basically means that it was a mismanaged and ruined country. I do remember empty shelves in all kinds of shops or how worthless was our currency nominated eventually in millions due to high inflation. So it is enormous joy for me to observe how Polish economy has been continuously growing since the system transformation, which is nearly for free decades now, and to enjoy the benefits coming from the EU integration. Speaking of which, I am such a person who benefits from the common market and related freedoms of the European Union, as for the last ten years I've lived in the Netherlands, working for an international company on region EMEA which stands for Europe, Middle East, Africa. And yes, we did meet in the UK while I was visiting a technological company in pursuit of new solutions for the corporation I work. I do remember that time, it was a pleasure meeting you then as well.

**Daniel:** Great, great. Okay, brilliant. So if you could go back in history for a moment and tell us a bit more about your background – and the only reason I'm asking about this, it's because it seems that you've made your way into technology in a bit different way than we would normally think about it right now, so people normally go to university and they study technology and then they end up working for bigger or smaller technological companies, but in your situation it was a bit different.

**Szymon:** Yeah, I think that you're asking: "How come are you working in the technological industry?" while I have a degree in sociology.

**Daniel:** Well, that's what LinkedIn says, so I'm asking, I'm just curious.

**Szymon:** I also have pretty strong mathematical background, because I graduated from one of the best high school specializing in math in Warsaw, it's been top-ranked back in my school days and it is top-ranked now, too. So, I am not, you know, purely coming from very human science, I did understand what technology might be about, meaning the mathematics. This has equipped me with enough tools, knowledge and analytical skills to deal with the high-tech. Yet simultaneously, at the age when, you know, you graduate from high school and you're looking for what to do with yourself, which program to choose for your further education, I wanted to understand more about the human nature. And besides that, it was also the time when the idea of applied science and interdisciplinary approach got its momentum. So all these factors, plus a bit of various coincidences, resulted in me studying sociology for five years. But while I was studying, I also started working for a consulting company – this taught me how the business works also on international level, as we were trying to match the Polish partners with European partners. There was also an episode in my professional career that I was running together with my friend a small IT company offering web pages and network administration services. So as you see, I got background in various fields which, I believe, allows me to see the things from a broader perspective, yet not missing technological principles. That's basically how it happened.

**Daniel:** Okay, understood. I'm gonna be quite honest here, I'm super interested in your international experience and probably that's gonna be the main frame for this interview. So how did it affect your professional life, how does it affect your professional life right now, the international experience you have?

**Szymon:** When I moved to the Netherlands ten years ago, it's been definitely a big change for me. Mostly because my duties at the very beginning covered a big region that literally stretched from Vladivostok, Far East Russia, to Cape Town, South Africa. I travelled quite extensively to countries I would never see if not my job. This was different cultures, different ways of building mutual trust, different technical problems occurring because of different environmental conditions and different work culture. Even different understanding of time, if you can imagine that; some countries, they approach it differently.

**Daniel:** Yes, absolutely.

**Szymon:** So that was the main, let's say, change for me and also it was the thing which was the most demanding for me to adapt. Surprisingly, it was not that much difficult from strictly professional point of view. I mean, system integrators I used to work with in Poland had more technical knowledge and better trained staff than companies I started working with. For example, you know, the topics which I could just slightly touch when making a training in Poland I had to elaborate quite extensively in countries such as Turkmenistan or Azerbaijan.

**Daniel:** I see. Well, I guess when it comes to technology it's quite important, the educational part of it, because when you use new technology, obviously you need to first learn how it works and implement it in your specific conditions for your specific applications.

**Szymon:** But to be also a hundred percent honest, I must say that there is also the second-hand side, you know of this change, because I could participate in a project much bigger and much more globally known like Burdż Chalifa for example, the tallest building in the world. And this is a different kind of a challenge, different kind of the approach which you have to make to do such things. Or the Dubai Airport – there is nothing like that when it comes to the projects in Poland, and this kind of mega structures, massive projects with multiplied difficulties, they did happen in my job when I moved abroad.

**Daniel:** That's great. So if we switch perspectives for a moment right now, there is a lot of support programs in different countries, also in Poland, but there's nothing, in my opinion, there is nothing like a solid chunk of experience. So do you think moving back to Poland right now could progress your career even further?

**Szymon:** Yes, I believe so, under condition that there are companies which could be interested in a person like me in order to expand their international operations or extend their business offer with new technological solutions. These are the two main fields, I believe, I could deliver the biggest chunk of added value. On the other hand, I do believe in a common European market in a sense that to connect a company from Poland with a company, let's say, from the Netherlands, you don't really have to be physically present in either of countries. I mean, you know, in certain moment, of course, personal contact is necessary, but to maintain it, you can just make use of current communication media.

**Daniel:** Absolutely.

**Szymon:** So from this perspective, you know, yes, it would be lovely if I could come back to Poland and find an exciting job and help Polish entrepreneurs to develop. On the other hand, I think I can do the same still staying in the Netherlands.

**Daniel:** In that motion then, let's talk about your craft now. I understand you could call yourself business development manager, it took me some time to actually find a couple of different definitions of what does it stand for, what is business development, some say it's more arts others say it's more science. What's Biz Dev for you, then?

**Szymon:** If you ask me, it's neither art nor science. It's all about the proper defining of the key players you would like to approach, key stakeholders, as it is popular to describe it nowadays, then establishing and maintaining a good working relationship. In my industry these are mostly architects, specifiers designers and users; these are the people we want to approach. We try to educate them about the latest developments coming from the industry, new solutions. How to solve current problems with new technologies and why it is better than all solutions of the competitors' solutions. To do so you need to focus on specific segments of the market, or verticals. You need to understand the challenges and offer them a matching solution. So if they're happy with what you're trying to present to them, it is more likely that they're going to specify it. Plus it's crucial that you need to offer them support in designing or running proof of concepts. These are all, you know, the small factors which actually make your solution, especially if it is a new thing which hasn't been yet proved, more reliable for them. So for me I would split business development into two parts: one would be maintaining personal contacts with people responsible to cooperate with you from the other side and the second part would be to have a good technological background and a good offer which will be basically attractive to them.

**Daniel:** So it might be the case that it's both arts, when it comes to people and science.

**Szymon:** Actually it might be, but I would like rather, you know, to approach it like an organizational challenge, that if you have the proper people with the proper approach, proper attitude, then your business development will be running. If you just focus about the few formulas how to organize business development, then you are going to miss one of the most important ingredients.

**Daniel:** I see. So in that case, where does it sit within the organization. Let's say, there is a technical company somewhere in Poland and they would like to start finding new clients, finding new partners. Is it something that everyone should do or there are people who are meant to be trained to do that?

**Szymon:** That pretty much depends on the size of an organization. I see business development as a precise activity, so organizationally I would locate it within sales department, but not necessarily with responsibility for bringing big size volumes to a company. It's more about bringing new opportunities to the table, establishing new contacts, listening to what's going on in your specific vertical. If it is railways, for example, it would be good if you get the membership to the industrial bodies or international organizations; know their plans and know what's their headache, because this access to all of these technological gimmicks would be that they're actually solving somebody's headache.

**Daniel:** Absolutely, that's true. When I wrote the plan for the interview I was thinking that, well, I'm still thinking, that business development it's actually super people-oriented activity because you need to, as you just said, you need to solve people's headaches and you need to ask the correct questions and you need to try to find people who have the headaches as well. So I've made that statement that people are actually catalysts and by connecting facts good things can happen naturally. So does it come naturally, the business development you do, or is it something very hard to do? Maybe you can share with us some stories about how you've done something in the past.

**Szymon:** Yes, let me try. It's both. I mean, in my organization actually we have dedicated people to maintain this communication with the professional bodies and specific decision-makers which we tried to target, while my job would be more like: "Okay, when it comes that we have a good relation, I'll be coming to them with a specific piece of knowledge, with a specific solution and my goal would be to convince them that yes, this is what you need." In that respect, this is not that much for me to work directly with people, although this part of working with human beings is there as well. But if I think about how many hours a week I spend actually designing something, which physically means putting some cones and triangles and circles on the floor plans, that would be much more time than talking to people and just exchanging the news, and convincing that we are still good friends. So it's both. On the other hand, as you said, indeed sometimes it goes naturally, you know, like with this English company which you mentioned at the very beginning of our discussion, of our conversation today. They had brilliant solution which we wanted to integrate into the scope of our solutions, of our products, which you could offer to the market and this way extend what we could offer with something giving the added value. And it does not work, it does not fly as long as you don't really have the business opportunity in which this solution could be effectively used. But at the moment when we have such a problem brought to us by our customers or there's a new project and they would like to solve specific problem somehow, then this is a good moment to connect with your technological partner, this is a good moment to extend your offer with this new technology and then offer something which would be unique or at least better than the typical solutions used in the industry. And indeed I have numerous examples from all over EMEA region when suddenly I've heard people were coming to us, because they liked so much a specific piece of technology which we had and the others couldn't deliver it the same effective way as we did. Or the opposite, when we approach the other people to extend our offer and our technological advance with somebody else's technologies. It's happening all the time, it's always that.

**Daniel:** I see. So if you would make a suggestion for a person or organization on how to actually implement practical biz dev operations, is there such a thing that you could, you know, put on paper like a to-do list or checklist, something that is practical for other companies?

**Szymon:** I believe so, yes, that it should be possible to organize it, but yet again, it would be good if you have good staff, good people, good employees on your side, with open minds, who have good personal skills and on the other hand, the people, they need to understand the technology, at least in my industry. Everything here is high-tech and understanding the basic concepts, the trends of the industry, what would be the impact of new technologies is also crucial. For the small organization, I would say that it would be smart to focus on a specific market or vertical market. So you don't address everything because then you also address nothing. If you would like to have your offer stronger, your business to develop better, just focus on specific segment and then try to approach it. That's how I would see it.

**Daniel:** Okay, I mean, I've been visiting some of the events and shows here in Poland since I've moved here and they were more focused on start-ups. And my question is whether business development is a key part of any start-up or is it something that only comes into play when the product or service is actually finished, I don't know, I'm just curious, because I've got my own opinion, but I would like to hear what's your view on this.

**Szymon:** You know, start-up is such a creature which, you know, has big dynamics in getting the new technology and making it usable. On the other hand, it's also an organization which, by definition, typically struggles with the financing. So this is why, you know, start-ups are looking for some grants, for some fundraising money and they try, you know, to sell their ideas to venture entrepreneurs and this is like the biggest limitation with the start-up. You don't really have money in the start-up stage to do this part properly. On the other hand, from the very beginning you need to be connected with your future customers. You would like, perhaps, to test your prototypes with them. If it is something which you would like to sell among the law enforcement, for example, in the future it would be good if these law enforcement people could actually test it at the stage when it is a prototype and give you the feedback how you can improve it and which of your ideas were wrong, which were good. How do you think about that?

**Daniel:** Yes, absolutely, I mean, in my opinion business development is just a must. It has to happen from the very beginning, but in different contexts, obviously. But, just a second ago, one extra question came into my mind which is: do you think that companies in general are open for such new ideas. So, let's say, we're running a technology start-up and we would like to test the product or test the service, do you think that companies will freely allow us to cooperate with them or is it super restricted and nobody wants to talk to start-ups or small technology companies?

**Szymon:** I believe that, you know, even I'm working in a security market, which is, you know, a bit different market than any other technological market because it's a bit more conservative, so the new ideas, they are not gaining that easy access to the heads of the security people as in, perhaps, IT industry. However, I've personally been in the situations where small companies, start-ups, they actually got their momentum right and they convinced people from the industry that what they develop,

what they offer would be a major change, would be a new trend, would be a standard in the future and this is why people from security, even though they have certain limitations, organizational or legal, they still are open for new ideas. If, for example, you would approach an airport and their security rooms and the way how they monitor the security at the airport with some new brilliant solution, I'm pretty much sure that they would allow it to be tested.

**Daniel:** Well, that's great, it's empowering when you think about this and that's my opinion as well; it's just about making those connections and trying to actually reach the people who you can present the solution to.

**Szymon:** The difficult point, of course, would be, you know, to present it in such an attractive way that they would think: "Yes, if we have it in the future, if we help with the development of this thing, then we would benefit." So, you know, at the moment it is a win-win situation, definitely. I think that even start-ups can have very, maybe not easy, but possible way to reach their customers, to reach their final end users and together with them to make some proof of concepts and to test technologies on living organisms.

**Daniel:** Right, so let's move into even bigger idea then. So if there is a technology company somewhere, should they focus on the local market to make the proof of concept or maybe to trial their technology or should they maybe try with the scenario of having an international partner straight away, do you think there is a merit to it?

**Szymon:** I would rather go the international way. Why do I think so? We talk to each other being in different countries in the European Union. Everything what happens, you know, in the European Union is not that much country-specific anymore. In Poland, for example, I've just checked, some days ago, the latest economic data and it said that forty percent of the GDP in Poland is generated by export. It shows how much you can gain when you open to cooperate with different partners from abroad. Of course, local markets may also have potential to develop but I think that, especially for the technological industry, it's better if you try to extend from just one country to multiple countries, even to regional approach.

**Daniel:** Well, I'm looking from the same side. Since I've been living and working abroad I've got the same opinion that it's no longer a closed economy per country. It's more like a living organism, like you've just said, and it seems like the barriers are no longer there and it's just a matter of a good idea, good product and just some business development, as we spoke about it today.

**Szymon:** Exactly, especially that it also limits the chances for failure, because what if the brilliant idea, a new start-up an entrepreneur has does not really work in Estonia, or does not really work in Poland, or does not really work in Slovenia, but then somehow it could work in Germany or maybe in Italy, or somewhere else. The more markets you try to approach, the bigger chance that actually you'll find somebody

who will be thinking the same way as you do and will find the proper use for your technology.

**Daniel:** Okay, so if we would talk about technology which is more software-oriented, so I'm just looking at companies in Poland right now and quite a lot of companies do software services; so they are super-efficient engineers, they're super qualified, at reasonable prices, I suppose, in comparison to maybe other countries, but they don't have the idea, so they just do the software, let's say. What would be the way, in your opinion, to find their first international partner or client?

**Szymon:** Well, you know, the old school approach would be: go to them, meet the people there, make the first contacts and develop from this stage. I guess that nowadays, even this is not really necessary, because, you know, using the social media, using the Internet, using the new communication media you can actually find these people without leaving the room. So to extend it, it's also about the marketing – nothing will happen as long as nobody knows that you exist. The same with these companies, if this company has a brilliant idea, they have to somehow advertise themselves and make themselves visible. This is the first stage – to start talking. The second stage would be that they have to somehow be better than their competitors. And it's not necessarily just the price. Perhaps the quality of the programming or, you know, being always on time and not forgetting about the deadlines, that would be the fact which also can make the differentiator between them and their, for example, same price or even cheaper company from India.

**Daniel:** So the opportunity is out there, it's just about communicating your message, I guess, and for technology companies, I think it's never been easier to do it. Well, that's why we talk about international business development. One last question; I'm quite curious what you are going to say about it: as a country, Poland, we've been recently celebrating our hundred years of independence and I'm maybe not skeptical but I'm in that group of people that try to look more into the future and not look back. Okay, we've been independent for a hundred years, that's great, and I'm really proud of all the people who made it, but do you think we should maybe focus more on the future and what would be your suggestion for Polish companies in general. What they should do to create prosperity for the next hundred years?

**Szymon:** Well, Daniel, I personally think you are hundred percent right. We should be more focusing about the future than the past. The future is what is going to shape us, I mean, the past did shape us already, but we don't have any impact on that anymore and with the future we do. Your question was about how long time perspective?

**Daniel:** Well, the next hundred years, let's say, because it was a nice, round number, so next hundred years.

**Szymon:** Well, I cannot give you, of course, any reliable prediction of what is going to happen in the next hundred years, especially with the current speed of developing technology, but some factors we can see already, so the big words nowadays, this is artificial intelligence, this is data mining, this is the Internet of things and these things are already happening. These technologies are already emerging, but they are going to be, at least in my personal opinion, a major driver for whatever will happen with economy and humanity in next years. So this is what I would be betting on. Definitely, we're gonna have artificial intelligence everywhere around us. Smart cameras, our smartphones, our personal assistants, you know, everything that serves different kinds, this is artificial intelligence. And it's more and more reality. Of course the more we have artificial intelligence and the things which can communicate among each other and also with us, with humans, that will require changes in our perception, but also in our legal systems like who is actually to be blamed in case of a car crash in which automatically driven car participated. Is it the manufacturer of a car, is it the manufacturer of the software or is it the owner of the car? You know, so all of these things, all of these problems have to be addressed and I believe they will find their proper answers in pretty close future and this will most probably shape our century, the twenty first century for the next decades and from that we will see what will happen next. Thinking about hundred year's perspective, I could actually imagine maybe even artificial consciousness. We don't know what the consciousness is now, but perhaps we will in the next few years and then perhaps we can also emulate it with our computers. So the future is great, the opportunities are there, I'm excited thinking about it and I think this is gonna be a great hundred years for Poland, for the European Union, for business, basically.

**Daniel:** Brilliant. It's been great Szymon, thank you very much for your patience, because we had some issues at the beginning, technical issues obviously. Technology cannot always work.

**Szymon:** We're technical people, we deal with issues all the time, you know. So it's not a problem at all.

**Daniel:** Exactly, brilliant. It was great to have you here. Thank you very much I wish you all the best, Szymon, thank you.

**Szymon:** Thank you very much Daniel, thank you for giving me a chance to participate in this initiative. I keep my fingers crossed that everything goes well.

**Daniel:** Brilliant, thank you very much.

**Szymon:** Thank you.