ICT and ASML team up to bring sync services to the next level

No more worries about the syncs

Around 2013, ASML ran into a problem familiar to many fast-growing high tech companies. With its technology growing increasingly complex, its software engineers were fully focused on product development while spending less time on the process behind it all. But outsourcing process support was unsatisfactory – until ASML's Stefan de Hoog and Ad van Dongen of ICT Group tried a new approach. Today, a team of formerly jobless people now trained as 'sync services' specialists at ICT support ASML's software engineers in getting things done.

Stephen Teeuwen

ASML is the world's leading manufacturer of chip-making equipment. 'Together with our customers, suppliers and partners we constantly push technology forward,' says Stefan de Hoog, senior manager for business change initiatives and business governance at ASML's Presidents' Office. 'Our software developers have to be creative, focused, wired to always stay ahead of the game. In a fast-paced environment like this, it's a challenge to systematically commit the time and energy for things like a user manual for a new piece of software.'

When De Hoog joined ASML in 2013, he felt the administrative processes surrounding the more innovative work – which ASML calls 'syncs' – were not running smoothly. 'One key issue was the process of getting new solutions integrated into the Qualified Baseline, or QBL. That means the changes resulting from new solutions will be systematically implemented in everything that follows. Working with Ad van Dongen of ICT, I started to think of ways to improve that process, capitalizing on the best of ASML and its supply chain.'

Uncommon approach

Numerous software specialists at ICT Group were already working at ASML, so the level of supplier intimacy was high. They knew the company well. De Hoog challenged Van Dongen and his crew to surprise everyone with a solution to the problem. 'He really stuck out his neck,' says Van Dongen, looking back. 'Stefan presented us with a very general and very complicated problem and asked us to solve it.'

The solution was somewhat radical, Van Dongen recalls: 'I remember driving home from a meeting at ASML and suddenly realizing the key was not technical knowledge or capacity, but the human factor: it was a people problem. A week later, I went back to Stefan and said, we can do it. But we need to put a very different kind of team on this job.'

Van Dongen and his team members Rik van Bakel, Menno Valk and Huub Janssen set out to find the right match for the job – beginning at the employment agency. 'We went looking for unemployed people who had intermediate vocational training in IT. We then narrowed our search to those people who would find fulfilment in doing very precise work, where routine, concentration and discipline are crucial.'

The solution to the 'people problem' nonetheless met with some resistance at ASML. De Hoog says: 'Remember, we'd been having trouble with syncs for several years – and now we were introducing a completely open-ended, and very uncommon, approach to outsourcing, while pinning our hopes on a category of staff members both ASML and ICT Group were quite unfamiliar

with. You can imagine the idea took some flak in the beginning. But ASML has a very entrepreneurial spirit. That's what made this possible.'

Win-win-win

To avoid risk, ICT Group proposed a rollout in five phases. First the problem was defined, along with the proposed technical and business solution. Then ICT provided small-scale proof of performance. The third phase was to upscale the team and provide proof of performance on a larger scale. In the fourth and fifth phases cost control and reduction came into play. 'ASML agreed to shift the cost back to the final stages of the project,' says Van Dongen. 'That gave us the time we needed to gradually explore this new model.' De Hoog adds: 'Change works best if there's a foundation of trust, and I had complete trust in the ICT Group. They have a long history with ASML. They have credibility.'

Among the initial sceptics at ASML was team leader Marco de Boer. But even he was soon convinced. 'The point of sync work is that it has to be done meticulously, without error. It calls for a special kind of focus. And that's exactly what the people on the sync services team are best at.'

De Boer's team is one of over twenty different teams throughout ASML who regularly pass on sync assignments to the services team. Each team has its own focus, budget, deadlines and team leader. De Boer is impressed with how ICT Group handles this complexity. 'Syncs are steadily delivered every four weeks. As software engineers we can get on with innovating and pushing technology forward, while the sync team is there supporting us in doing that in a systematic way. It's all about the right focus.'

ICT Group is pleased to have gotten to the heart of the problem, and ASML now has a solution that works like a charm. All in all,

the sync services team exemplifies numerous values cherished by both partners: innovation, supplier intimacy and – not least – corporate social responsibility. 'Social responsibility may not have been the aim when we set out,' Van Dongen says, 'but the solution we found certainly is an encouraging example of it.' In fact, the most important benefit of the new setup, De Hoog and Van Dongen both agree, is that the sync team members have gone from long-term unemployment or even unemployability to satisfying jobs, doing work they excel at and are happy to be doing. In other words: it's a true win-win-win situation.

Stephen Teeuwen is an independent bilingual (English and Dutch) copywriter based in the Netherlands.

Edited by Nieke Roos