

Community Talk with: Thomas Bär

Thomas originally studied production engineering before gaining his PhD in the area of design engineering from the Saarland University in Saarbrücken, Germany. And it was while he was doing his PhD that he spent some time in Japan, “and that widened my horizon, as it were. As for my interests, these lay between IT, design engineering and production engineering, so this goes from one end of the process to the other.” It was in 1999 that he first joined Daimler, largely as a result of the contacts he had had during his PhD studies. After following a trainee programme, in 2002 he got started in the area of digital engineering and digital factory, working on research and pre-development. “That’s something I really took to. Indeed, it’s my job to bring scientific research and innovation to real-life application. While my work has remained more or less the same during my time at Daimler, I have moved from powertrains through bodywork to final assembly. So that’s a brief résumé of my professional life so far.”

Virtual commissioning

Looking at what you have achieved to date, what would you consider to be the highlights so far? “My PhD, certainly, and working for such a major player like Daimler, where I have gradually been getting more responsibility. I started off as a project leader and then took on more of a technical management role – not a general manager but in terms of managing projects.” One particular highlight Thomas refers to here is the research award for Virtual Commissioning he received at Daimler in 2010. It had taken

five years to get to the position where virtual commissioning really works, and then “when we passed it on to the user, it took another five years to get a standard process, introduced into all different car lines and so on.”

Virtual commissioning is at the heart of the ITEA project AVANTI, which finished last year in June. Was this your first hands-on experience with ITEA? “Yes, so I cannot claim to be a seasoned campaigner yet! In fact, it was rather by coincidence that I took over the coordination



of the project. A colleague of mine who had been drafting the proposal left the company to become a professor and it was left to me to find someone to take over. Having looked around and in the mirror I saw myself as the guy to take it forward. Of course, ITEA was not an unfamiliar name to me because a couple of years previously a neighbouring team was involved in the MODELISAR project. I had experience of working in European projects but not in ITEA. And I guess ITEA has grabbed hold of me now because I am also coordinating the follow-up to AVANTI, the ENTOC project that started in September last year and I have also provided input to the smart manufacturing workshop which was recently held. So I am, starting to spread my wings a little.”

People make things happen

As a ‘novice’, if you like, Thomas does not

have the benefit of calling on so many years to compare the ITEA of then and the ITEA of now. However, he has experienced the difference between the final Co-summit in Berlin and the DIF 2017 in Amsterdam. “I noticed quite a difference. In Amsterdam I had much more contact with people, with different partners. I felt there was much more opportunity to talk, to be involved. The Amsterdam event, with its workshops and very accessible booths, was ‘with it’ if I can put it this way. There was a more dynamic atmosphere. Like the walking dinner where you could really enjoy the company of the community and socialise informally. I think the tone has been set, and it’s encouraging. The panel sessions, too, threw up a lot of ideas, not necessarily new, but nevertheless they gave a good impression of what is going on in other companies and branches. More of this, please, in the future. At least, that’s my personal view.”

This aspect of the interaction between people is clearly important to Thomas and was a key factor in the AVANTI project. “I think that having the right mix of people was crucial to the success of the project. Experience and youth, having the right partners. We pushed for example the functional mock-up unit approach, which largely came from the guys of TWT. Without them we would not have succeeded. But we also had the SME EKS InTec, the leader in the virtual commissioning software market in Germany and maybe Europe. They worked so well together. And Daimler and others used these solutions. Ultimately, it’s the people – the right mix – that make it all happen.”

Getting technology into industry

How do ITEA projects compare with other European projects? “In a word, faster. Being industry driven and having less administrative bureaucracy than many other European projects, we see faster reactions, quicker turnaround. Of course, it’s never as fast as we would like it to be but I guess you can’t have everything. The projects do sharpen the competitive edges. It’s important from the perspective of a healthy business environment in Europe. If that helps us to seize the high ground on the global front, then ITEA is a very useful tool. In the years to come I think that ITEA’s mix of research, industry and academia will help push generic research forward and make it applicable for European industry so that opportunities to take the lead can be created.”

And does that make you happy? “Yes. I’m a research guy and I want to see the technology getting used in the industry. Does ITEA help me do that? Yes. Does that make me happy? Yes. I can push the requirements and challenges in the ITEA roadmap and stand a realistic chance of getting these challenges into a project, bring the right expertise and partners together to solve the challenge. If I can do this, and get the answers to the problems, then that makes me happy. And on a more personal note, ITEA has brought me not only contacts through the network but also friends. From Finland to Turkey, many of my project partners have become good and valued friends. As I said earlier, behind each technology stands a group of people and in that group of people, you will find friends. And that makes me happy!”