

Technology and Soft Skills Innovation Is the Key for Sinfo One

For the third year running, the Parma-based software firm has enjoyed double-digit growth. The secret is constant innovation, picking the right people, and new product development. In 2018, cloud computing will play a strategic role

Interview with Paola Pomi, CEO of Sinfo One

by Dario Colombo, in Parma

Sinfo One is enjoying continuous growth. Year after year, it reaffirms its status as a leader in Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP), Product Lifecycle Management (PLM) and Business Intelligence (BI). While it is growing in all sectors, the highlight of the Parma-based software company's activities is the Food & Beverage industry, in which its customer base (both in Italy and abroad) is growing relentlessly. With regard to its overseas business, for example, the firm has recently signed contracts with two Australian companies and one from the United Arab Emirates, which recognise in Sinfo One the ideal partner with which to develop innovative projects.

This strong performance is backed up by the figures. After closing 2016 with sales of €14.7 million, Sinfo One generated turnover of €16.1 million in 2017. The company has been growing for the last three years, with an average increase of 11%. Furthermore, although there is a long way to go until the year's end, the figures for 2018 show that the compa-

ny's target is in reach. "We want to close the year having recorded growth of 10% compared with 2017", admits **Paola Pomi, CEO of Sinfo One**. *Sistemi&Impresa* is chatting to her in early summer at the company's Parma headquarters, from where she usually carries out an annual review of her company's performance with our editorial staff¹. "It's an ambitious goal, but we are on target to meet our expectations", Ms Pomi notes, reiterating her organisation's growth. And there is reason to believe her, given that the company far outperformed its forecasts last year. The thing that really makes the Emilia-Romagna-based firm stand out is its EBITDA - "Double the average for our sector" - which enables Sinfo One to "continually invest in innovation". That is the 'secret' behind the growth of this company, which in 2018 celebrated 34 years in business. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that that is just one of the ingredients in a company that focuses, above all, on its people.

PAOLA POMI



A 44-year-old wife, mother and manager, Paola Pomi boasts vast experience in business management in the IT sector: she is CEO of Sinfo One, the system integrator that is making its mark all over the world with its considerable expertise in processes and challenges in the Food & Beverage sector. After helping to create the Sinfo One team, Pomi still has many leadership skills, ambitions and dreams. She is an expert in managing projects involving large national and international teams.

¹ The interview was held in July 2018, before the opening of the capital to two new minority shareholders: Tönnies and the Fondo Agrolimentare Italiano.

Let's start with that: how do you manage your human resources in a context of continuous growth?

Our staff numbers grow in proportion with our sales volumes. The key, however, is to select talent that will enable us to continue to grow with renewed energy. We focus on soft skills, rather than hard ones. What are they? Determination, positivity, energy, creativity, a desire to prove oneself... These qualities are not easy to identify, but they are essential to the work we do. That's why our management pays such careful attention to selecting the right staff. It's the most important challenge we face.

As regards overseas growth, you have recently expanded your foreign customer base with expansion into Australia...

We have signed two contracts with Australian food companies, which chose us because of our specialisation in that sector. But we have also launched activities in the United Arab Emirates. We recently signed a contract with an Abu Dhabi-based beverage company - the non-state-owned half belongs to a Lebanese businessman - which selected us as a partner for a huge challenge: by 2020, when the World Expo will be held in Dubai, it wants to boast the most highly automated production in the EMEA region. It is currently completing a new facility in the middle of the desert. Sinfo One has been tasked with ERP activities, i.e. the brain and nervous system of the company, which interfaces with the customer and launches orders, activating the automatic supply chain process. It is a highly ambitious project, in which technology plays a key role.

How did you overcome competition from other software firms with regard to this challenge?

I'm very proud of this deal, which I followed personally until the details were defined in late October 2017, after having managed the negotiations remotely. We managed to come out on top despite competition from companies from the US and India. We were favoured for our 'Italianness' and the fact that we would bring both quality and security to the project. It is these values that have also allowed us recently to sign with a US multinational in Belgium and - thanks to the Redfaire International joint venture - with a company in Serbia. Once again, our focus on technological innovation was appreciated in this case.



What are the specific characteristics of your projects in Italy?

They are more structured than those abroad, because the companies are smaller, but they have to deal with the same complex processes, despite the organisations being more 'simple'. Moreover, we have to deal with customers who have more limited budgets and less time at their disposal, but still have to face the same challenges as their foreign competitors. Sinfo One therefore has to use all its problem-solving skills in these projects.

You have talked about 'innovation in implementation': what does that mean?

This primarily refers to the methodologies the company uses to resolve the challenges it faces. As I said, the Italian market is where we learnt to work in highly complex contexts with little time and scant resources. This means launching projects based on reference models born out of dialogue with customers, to whom it is important to ask the right questions. This leads to the creation of prototypes, which enable us to develop the organisation's business model; the company then gives feedback about the project, so we are able to optimise the

model, ensuring it is 'simple' and consistent across all departments. Sinfo One offers secure and comprehensive implementation, facilitating balanced, optimal results for all corporate areas.

Let's talk about products: what's new in the field of ERP?

The latest release of SiFides – our proprietary ERP software – enriches the user experience in terms of the three As: *Alert*, *Analyse* and *Act*. The platform makes it possible to introduce alerts at various points of the process, allowing operators to know exactly what is going on when performing their day-to-day activities; SiFides then offers the possibility to carry out an analysis of the alert triggers, providing a summary of the information; lastly, the 'act' element allows the user to access actions to manage the situation. I'll give you an example: the company receives an alert because production has not received the raw materials; at this point, the ERP allows the operator to carry out in-depth data checks to find out whether the delay has taken place in the past, whilst also showing information about quality and costs; in light of this information, the operator can decide what action to take next, which might involve contacting the supplier or checking the status of the goods.

Cloud computing is enjoying strong growth: is ERP software adapting to this trend?

The new platform is cloud compliant in various forms: Infrastructure as a Service (IAAS); Software as a Service (SAAS); Platform as a Service (PAAS). We wanted to follow the trend, allowing the customer to choose their preferred method, as is already the case abroad, where companies are focusing their efforts in particular towards IAAS and SAAS. In Italy, we are pushing these two options, considering that IAAS is a very simple formula and, I believe, one of greater interest, because it offers the possibility to carry out secure performance tests and offers great reliability, delegating any complex issues to Sinfo One.

What is happening with JD Edwards, the Oracle product that you offer?

This is an ERP that is already available in IAAS form: the cloud offers considerable performance advantages because, depending on the project, customers can create specific test environments, without any

architectural constraints. In this sense, the cloud offers vast potential to overcome the obstacles of the past: the server does not always have adequate capacity to carry out the tests and, therefore, it used to be necessary to expand the space, with impacts on costs and, more importantly, on time. JD Edwards is achieving excellent market returns, and we recently signed agreements with two customers, whose projects will go online in spring 2019 in IAAS form.

Let's move on to PLM: is the market finally ripe to implement this technology?

PLM has always been an area in which Sinfo One has invested its expertise, with a view to both training and information: we are very much PLM evangelists, especially in the food sector, in which PLM is struggling to take off. However, it is true that, unlike in the past, Italy is now catching up with other countries. For example, we have launched three projects in Italy, like the one for Sperlari, which involved a rapid implementation of the PLM platform. In this case, the company - having been taken over by a new parent company - did not continue with its previous PLM solution, deeming Sinfo One's expertise to be more attractive. The challenge in this case was to offer data compatibility quickly, so as to speed up the time to market of new products, as well as innovation with New Product Development. In addition to Italy, we have also concentrated on overseas markets, signing new contracts with companies from the UK.

Since 2017 you have been a partner of Selerant, a company that specialises in PLM software, and you are looking to become the leading software firm for PLM in Italy: what advantages do you hope to gain?

Thanks to this partnership, we are able to offer our customers the best PLM solutions on the market without being consultants of a sole software vendor, because we have several solutions in our portfolio that enable us to offer greater added value. This choice satisfies customers' needs without imposing restrictions.

Speaking of added value, we have to talk about Business Intelligence: what activities have you carried out recently in this area?

Let's dispel the myth that BI is just about reporting: for us at Sinfo One, it is a key



Paola Pomi with Rosolino Pomi, Sinfo One's President, and Patrizia Pomi, Commercial Marketing Director

aspect of our business. It means structuring and analysing the data warehouse, because if you want to access information in order to better manage your business, and therefore make the right decisions, you can't rely on a simple report. There are approximately 1,300 precise indicators, which Sinfo One can provide thanks to its 20 years of expertise and investment in this field. One BI case is that of Illva Saronno, a project created purely for practice, in order to be used in other practice cases with a view to creating a platform to facilitate customer activities. However, there are many small and medium-sized customers that cannot expect to have a company management solution, and therefore have focused on establishing a data warehouse, with a structure that can implement small adjustments and therefore respond to the customer. Big data is a key issue, since unstructured information can be useful for carrying out analyses on sales, for example with regard to third-party channels, that can be helpful in understanding consumer trends. In this way, the company can launch specific promotions. Loyalty cards represent another step forward, since they not only

provide information about customers' habits, but also make it easier to launch targeted commercial initiatives.

Dashboards are a key aspect of BI: what measures have you implemented to improve their usability?

We are collaborating with universities to foster a new culture around the development of new graphics, with a view to offering dashboards capable of intuitively displaying salient information. Innovations in this area relate to the possibility of offering mobile reporting, so that all the indicators that could make a difference can be constantly monitored. Having said that, mobile solutions could be useful for all our technologies, ERP and PLM included, since mobile devices can automatically obtain other information from the field. For example, the mobile version of the BI software can 'suggest' to the vendor, during a meeting with a customer, which products to launch promotions on or which new products to offer, as well as showing the various specifications (including those generated by the PLM software) and other useful information, so the vendor can give a detailed explanation.