

Tobias Kaufuss

Founder & CEO, citadelle systems & digital

Hello Tobias, thank you for taking the time to do this interview. First, what can you tell us about yourself?

My name is Tobias Kaufuss and I am founder and CEO of the IT services company citadelle systems and the consulting firm citadelle digital.

My personal compass is made up of these four directions: family/friends, work, charity and learning. I try to balance myself across those directions.

They are all interrelated for me – a convergence which ultimately led to my decision to become an entrepreneur.

Family/friends: As a proud father of a daughter and lucky husband to a loving wife, my private life evolves around the Ruhr area in Germany, namely the city of Essen. When our daughter was born beginning of 2018, I readjusted my life more towards home. Having worked away from home for most of the past decade that meant stepping down from my then current role as CEO of a publicly listed company. Thus, I was also able to rebalance my life when I turned 40 last year.

Work: Looking at my CV in hindsight, it is all very straightforward and clear. Studied business administration with a focus on finance in Germany and the US, worked in several services industries (banking/retail/logistics/recycling/consulting/e-commerce), climbed the corporate ladder from student assistant to CEO and eventually applied all I had learned to become an entrepreneur myself. However, it is the pivots along the way that spice up one's life.

I moved apartments/places six times during my corporate career. I was promoted to managing director of a logistics company when I was 26. But decided to quit that job to pursue an MBA at the Kellogg School 2.5 years later. Some strategic consulting with Bain & Company and Supply Chain restructuring with one the largest recycling companies in Germany later, I rejoined my pre-MBA employer to revamp their group-wide sales. I ended up building their offering towards e-commerce companies as an intrapreneur. However, with my start-up having 100 employees and 3 locations after 3 years, I sold it in an internal asset deal to another business field within the group.

The free spirit in me said that after the sale is done, I would not be able to work independently anymore, so I quit to look for options within e-commerce and found a struggling global player in e-commerce services looking for an outside CEO to revive the company. We internationalized it even further, brought the company back on a growth trajectory and were able to attain a new majority investor to finance that growth. At that moment my free spirit and the fact that I was about to become a father colluded to make me step down from my job.

Charity: The North-American spirit of giving back has fascinated me ever since I was introduced to it. Painting the fence of a day-care facility for children in Chicago, building a playground for children as a consultant in Germany, hosting art auctions to collect money to support local schools in the less affluent north of my hometown. All of these activities add the necessary humility to one's life. No matter how well we do, we are so privileged to be able to live a self-determined life. It is important to help those in need – not with a checkbook mentality, but with time and effort. I have therefore been a proud member and president of my local chapter of the Round Table service club as well as a member of a Lions club in my hometown. The Lions motto sums it up pretty neatly for me: "We serve."

Learning: This direction of my life is reflected in so many different aspects. Apart from the fact that I consider a lot of things to be a learning experience, I enjoyed coming back to school for an MBA and later for executive education a lot. It opens up your mind and I come out refreshed every time. Last year I was able to gather experience as Chairman of the Board in the company I used to run as CEO. I liked the experience and decided to obtain a certification by Deutsche Boerse for board positions. CEO-CF is a learning experience for me as well while seeing friendly faces several times per year.



Can you present us citadelle systems & citadelle digital?

When I looked into management-buy-in opportunities last year, thus finally owning what you work for, I found an interesting accumulation of smaller IT services companies for sale in Germany: 5 to 20 people with up to 2m EUR annual revenue, being up to 25 years on the market.



After dozens of conversations, business partners and friends also becoming excited to join the case, I founded **citadelle systems AG**, end of March 2019 together with 10 more people (business experts ranging from Head of IT to M&A legal partner at a large auditing firm).

«AG» stands for a stock corporation which we chose as a platform to be able to buy 100% of those smaller businesses and paying part of the price with stock, thereby incentivizing the former owner to stay involved.

It is also easier to take in people we trust with valuable expertise as investors with this type of company.

Thanks to CEO-CF, I got to consider those aspects even before I founded the company simply by presenting my plan and receiving valuable feedback like that afterwards. We have already acquired our first two targets and will sign a third deal before year-end, thereby fulfilling our plan to acquire three companies each year.

Currently, 18 people work for the citadelle systems Group in five locations all over Germany and clients range from small enterprises to the public sector. If you do not consider your IT to work as a competitive advantage, come talk to us! Apart from that I am passing on my knowledge and experience as a coach to entrepreneurs, CEOs, board members and managers within my second company, **citadelle digital**.

Tobias, thank you for presenting your companies. To conclude, can you share a story that has helped you move forward?

Let us face my situation last year matter-of-factly: I stepped down as CEO of a publicly listed corporation with global operations without another job offer ready to be signed and had just become father to a beautiful little girl with a family needing my financial support.

While I fretted about my next career step, the discussion of my challenge within CEO-CF helped tremendously to weigh up all options. What might have been perceived one of the most hazardous decisions, thus quickly became a great way to pursue other not yet known opportunities.

Thanks to CEO-CF, I was even able to hone the business plan in later stages. Today, I could not be happier to have taken the plunge.

To know more about citadelle systems & citadelle digital

www.citadelle.systems

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