



Accace changes its leadership

Q&A with the former and new CEO



Jiří Majer has handed over the CEO role to his long-time colleague, Mihaela Pašek-Virlan. Over the past 13 years, Jiří has led Accace's evolution from a regional services provider to a company with more than 600 employees. Global coverage has also expanded, next-gen BPO solutions have been put into place and contracts have been signed with some of the world's largest and most demanding brands.

Jiří, you started your own company when you finished your studies, and you have been a businessman ever since. How did the early beginnings affect your life and what kind of person have you become?

I think there is no better education than starting a business from scratch. Looking back, it felt like taking a leap into the unknown as we started with empty hands and pockets. Even today I can recall those first months and years when we had to do everything by ourselves, even rebuilding and refurbishing our first office with our bare hands. I was an electrician, plumber, cleaner, salesman, secretary, bookkeeper, project manager, tax advisor, IT guy, invoicing clerk – a different profession each day! However, these beginnings made me able to adapt and grow with every new job. The experience not only helped me to understand – sometimes the hard way – how businesses are built and run, but also made me appreciate all types of work and the people doing the work.

What are your personal lessons learned from running your own business as a CEO? What is the best and the worst part of being a CEO?

When you run your own business, you have nowhere to hide. There is no shoulder to cry on, no helping hand reaching out. You just have to take the responsibility and find the way out from difficult situations. Being CEO is a tough job – it is not only about the huge amount of time you spend working. For me, the most challenging part was bearing the final responsibility. During some especially difficult periods there was a never-ending stream of questions running through my head: What if the big client does not pay on time and we have no money for salaries? What if we gave the wrong advice to the client during difficult times? What if the new solution does not work? What if the new colleague is not as good as we expect? Way too many "ifs". But I have learned that one can handle anything if you stay healthy, keep a positive mindset

and trust the closest people around you – both at home and in the office. And I am lucky to have such people around me.

What were the milestones in the company's philosophy when it comes to culture, management, growth, human resources and environmental responsibility?

One of those moments happened a couple of years ago. After many years in the business I got burned out and no longer enjoyed my work. I decided to take some time off to relax, regain some energy and then continue. But, to my big surprise, it did not help! I realized the reason why I no longer enjoyed leading Accace was because of my loss of purpose. At that time I considered the businesses responsible for many issues in the world around us – environmental damage, corrupt politicians, brainwashing of people, ignoring poverty and defining success by money and the wealth you own. Did I want to spend my life as a careless businessman or did I want to help where help was needed? I even considered starting again in some other area that would make more sense to me, such as in education or protection of the environment. I was literally one signature away from selling Accace.

Fortunately, I realized one key thing: if I believe that businesses should be held responsible for so many negative things around us, what is the right step to take? To sell my business and leave this "ugly playground" with a nice amount of money and be financially secure? To start to preach how bad the business is and that it needs to change? Or to stay in the business and try to change it from the inside? As you know, I decided for the second option – I want Accace to become a company that is guided by a strong set of values, showing that the main purpose of business, in fact, is to make our world a better place for people both inside and outside of the business environment. Today I feel that I again found the right purpose for myself and it elevates me every single day. I hope this purpose will attract more people with similar mindsets to Accace.

What are the most serious business decisions you had to take over the years?

One occurred just a few years after I founded Accace. After starting our business in Slovakia, we quickly expanded and opened offices in Romania, Ukraine, Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. Business was running well, investors were pouring into the CEE region each day. At that time, speaking English and having a clue about accounting, taxes and law meant instant success in the industry. But then in 2008 the financial crisis hit Europe. It felt like the flow of investors stopped from one day to the next. I was wondering: what now? We have all these new offices, new colleagues, but without new clients we are going to run out of money very fast. That was when I seriously considered closing all the new offices and only stay open for business in Slovakia. After a couple of tough discussions with my team, we decided not to give up. To do business in a growing economy is very simple. But can anybody predict when the economy will grow again? No. Just be-

Can you recall a time when you were the happiest about your business?

I am always happy when I see my colleagues sharing their passion and helping each other, when I see their courage by taking initiative and overcoming a difficult situation. Or when I meet a satisfied client, who praises us for the work we do. Or when I see my colleagues helping and doing good in the community. Fortunately, there are many moments like this.

When you look at your business today, how do you perceive it? And where would you like to see it in the long run?

Accace is no longer only my business. Legally speaking, currently there are more owners. But I feel like Accace is a business of all the people working within. Unfortunately, I am not good at praising others or even myself. But I would like to use this opportunity to praise and thank those who deserve it. When I look at other compa-

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About Jiří Leading the company as CEO for over 13 years, Jiří played an indispensable role in the success of Accace. Over the years he has been close to his colleagues, guiding them through ups and downs, sharing his ambition, energy, courage and resilience. His everyday efforts have been driven by his commitment to think outside the box and his passion for innovation. His motto „be a trendsetter, not a follower,“ has melted into the strategy of Accace.



cause there are no favourable economic conditions at the moment, shall we give up? Of course not, so we decided to take the chance and learn how to do business when the market is down. It sounded like more fun and, eventually, it was.

nies in the same industry, where they are and where Accace is after only 13 years, I believe we have done very well and we continue doing a great job. I would like to thank all my colleagues for the energy and passion they invested in Accace! Last, but not least, I would like to thank my wife,

Sylva, for helping me get through the difficult times, and bearing with me during the numerous ups and downs. Where I would like to see Accace in the long run is clearly defined by our strategic goals by 2028: helping our clients succeed in at least 50 countries, through our unique approach and high-quality services, and becoming the no. 1 employer of choice for talented people in the countries in which we operate.

Did you ever considered looking outside the company to fill the CEO position?

No. I believe Accace should be led by a person who has grown inside the company. The most important characteristics of a CEO in such a dynamic business as ours are the love for change and the courage to take up challenges. I am convinced, also in this respect, that I made a good decision.

So what are your next steps and what journey will you embark on next? What are your wishes to Mihaela as the new CEO?

My journey continues with Accace, but in a different role. I remain a member of the Executive Board, but I want to focus more on projects that I see as critical for our future success, such as artificial intelligence or open book management. Remaining as the majority shareholder, my most important role is to make sure we continue in our mission to support our clients, colleagues

and partners to attain their dreams, while leaving a positive imprint on the world.

I have known Mihaela for many years, so I am sure she will lead Accace in the right direction. To succeed in it, she will need the same ingredients I mentioned earlier: optimism, good health, great colleagues around and a supportive family.

Mihaela, tell us a bit about yourself and your history in Accace.

I have held various roles since the beginning and, honestly, I very much enjoyed all of them. I believe the possibility to experiment is what keeps me motivated. It may be because I come from a legal profession and thus, influenced by liberal thoughts and ideas, I am in need of a constant challenge. I have overcome a lot of challenges, from a greenfield start with Accace's Romanian legal practice to helping set-up multi-country operations. Also, I found my soulmate in Accace, so I guess we really take care to keep a family-like environment.



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About Mihaela Holding several top management positions while being a strong-willed, dedicated, eager person who truly believes in what she is doing, Mihaela has been shaping the long-term vision and culture of the company since joining Accace in 2007. Her confidence to approach things in new ways and her inclination to challenge the culture of doing business give her the credit to take over the CEO role and encourage the further growth of Accace.

Now that we know what Accace means to Jiří, could you elaborate what it means to you?

Accace represents the platform to which we want to invite our colleagues, clients and partners, and use the business environment to do something good for this community. We encourage all of them to come and feel empowered by developing their individual skills, and experiment with different ways of doing business in our industry. Our way of providing services in which we understand the need for freedom and flexibility of us as individuals, along with the need to provide the best quality and constant innovation to our clients.

What are the biggest business challenges we are about to face?

Technology and globalization changes everybody's life and our business is – and will continue to be – affected, just as any other business. The biggest challenge I see is to implement and use new technology wisely while taking into consideration the impact it has on people and the environment. Considering the current environmental and political climate, there are very strong signs that a slowdown in the global economy might come once again.

People close to you often hear you say: work needs to be fun. How can one achieve this in such a dynamic business as ours and in a company that is striving for continuous growth?

For a person who does not smile much, "work needs to be fun" is a funny thing to say. I see this very simply: do something that brings you joy, pride and fulfilment, and then the fun will come. Do not settle! If one does not enjoy what they do, one cannot

have fun. For me a lot of the joy and fun comes from the amazing people I have around me.

Our growth comes exactly from the push we get from our business dynamics, which teaches us to experiment with new ways of providing our services – and dare to fail! with technology. But we must ultimately never forget that we are here to re-invent the world of business process outsourcing and advisory services.

Your colleagues often say you give them a new perspective on things and make them think in new ways. Will you keep this approach as the new CEO? Should we expect some big changes?

Big changes will be provided by the technology, environment and economy, not by me. I simply like to question how we do certain things in order to improve or to find new and fresh ways of doing them. Together, with our colleagues, we will navigate our way towards these changes in order to preserve the culture of Accace that we all enjoy and share.

What do you consider as a key to the success of Accace?

We have over 600 "keys to the success of Accace" and each of our colleagues represents one. Moreover, we always change and reinvent ourselves, so the company evolves together with our people and clients while our values remain as strong as they have been since our early beginnings.

In few years' time, I would like to see not 1 Accace, but thousands of versions of Accace, each driven by a passionate dreamer who want to change a small part of their world for the best.

About Accace

Originally established in Central and Eastern Europe in 2006, Accace ranks among the leading outsourcing and consultancy providers in this region. We have vast experience with handling small to large scale, multi-country outsourcing projects and providing comprehensive range of services to over 2 000 customers.

Accace operates internationally as Accace Circle, a business community of Accace branches and our reliable partners, that provides unified, expert services and streamlined processes under one account management and shared online platform.