

Jan Zajic

Control is good, Controlling is better.

Controlling is something that Jan Zajic was never interested in. He laughs at the suggestion. "Controlling was my first job after uni," he says, "but I didn't like it at all. It was rather old-fashioned and I was really bored." He wanted to get a job in marketing or, even better, work on the stock exchange. Because that would be a challenge, that was where life happened; his work would count for something, and he could really make a difference. Indeed, all these things were to come true for Zajic—but not exactly in the way he expected. In fact not only did he end up in controlling again, but, what really surprised him the most, he also loves it!

Born in the Czech Republic, he studied management and applied economics at Mendel University in Brno and graduated with a Masters degree. After his first job Barum Continental in Otrokovice was looking for a controller. When Zajic was offered the job, he immediately accepted. Why? "Because of the company," he says. "I already associated the name Continental with success, with professional staff. They know what they do and how to do it. Nothing can beat this attitude, this strategy, this way of working." But that wasn't all. It didn't take him long to recognize that controlling could be one of the most exciting jobs out there.

"Most people think that it's rather dry and only concerns numbers, perhaps a bit like bookkeeping. But it's quite different. It's a really varied job!" He compares his role to that of the lookout on a sailing ship.

"You're the one who has to look far into the future, who tells the captain and crew where we are now, where there are rocks and shallows ahead, the direction we need to be heading in, and what we all need to do to get there." That means that a controller really needs to get to know his captain and crew well.

"That is one of the most interesting aspects of the job," he says, running a hand through his short, spiky hair. "You need information from every department and you need to speak to everyone so that you all understand each other and come together to achieve the same end result."

The 37-year-old can hardly get the words out fast enough. When Jan Zajic is convinced of something, his face lights up, and right now he's beaming. When he then became plant controller in Púchov, Slovakia in 2006, it wasn't just because it was a step up the career ladder, but also because he had by then become completely won over by his job, and because something else had happened.

"My boss in Otrokovice had changed by life," says Zajic frankly. "And I have simply met some great people at Conti." He has no interest in going back to marketing. "The stock exchange still interests me," he admits. "I follow what's happening there, but I want to stay in controlling."

After Púchov, his next move was to Malaysia in 2011, a country that Zajic knew nothing about until then. He had completed various training courses, including in London, Bratislava, and seven months at Continental in Hanover. He and his wife had also traveled to Asia several times, but professionally Malaysia was new ground for him. "It is not just the temperature, the climate—in Malaysia there are of course different mentalities that I had to get used to at first." The country's population is a blend of several cultures: Malays, Chinese, and Indians. For a European, that presents a challenge day to day, but Zajic loves a good

challenge. He enjoys living in Asia, and, perhaps even more importantly for him, so does his wife. "Yes," he says with a laugh, "she likes it even more than me! Seeing that my private life is by and large well-balanced and neither work nor family has to draw the short straw, well that's really a great motivator and it makes you go that little bit further."

This motivation is also boosted by the fact that things are always moving forward at Continental, he says. "What I like is the continual, ongoing improvement of each individual process. We don't always have to talk about waste or costs or productivity, we really like to be efficient and effective in everything that we do." Because efficiency is what it's all about in commercial vehicle tires, says Zajic. "Every minute of every day, we're thinking about efficiency, exploring further possibilities, and improving where we can." For him, an active sportsman who only misses skiing in Malaysia, efficiency is key and not just in his work. He sees a lot of common ground between his work and leisure, whether it's tennis, cycling or any other form of sport.

"The most important thing and, I think, the similarity," says Zajic, "is the passion. Athletes have to be passionate about winning, have a thirst for competition." He himself possesses it in spades. Even as a child, he would compete with his brother. With fourteen months advantage over him, his brother was always taller, stronger, and faster, and the younger brother strove to outperform the elder. "That is an attitude that I take to work with me. I want to be better tomorrow than I am today. And I get the sense that it's just the same with commercial vehicle tires—you need the passion to always improve and to create value for tomorrow. What we do is good. And we can be even better."

He has the same goal for his own position. Today he is the lookout man for the sailing ship and therefore holds the fate of the company and its employees in his hands, a responsibility of which he is aware every day. Three or four times a week, he and his team walk through the factory and talk to their colleagues in the various departments. "Even though I'm not the final decision-maker, I still bear a certain responsibility for the people that work here. It is my job to find the best possible solution for all sides, between the financial targets and social values, every single day."

Jan Zajic is happy that he decided to take the Continental job in Otrokovice rather than work on the stock exchange. "When I look back on my twelve years at Continental, I wouldn't have missed a single minute of them. The world of Continental and commercial vehicle tires is a huge challenge and is teaching me so many things—that is what makes it so attractive. Work has almost become like a drug."

A touch of astonishment still resonates in this closing sentence, that the job he once found so boring now challenges, interests, and fulfills him.