

'We're the only provider of this platform in this region and we're very successful'

■ Property Weekly speaks to Dr Uwe Forgber, Director of conject Dubai

Founded in Germany in 2000, conject is a one-stop shop for real estate management, covering everything from marketing and sales, project management, construction planning, CAFM, object management, and real estate accounting in one integrated solution. Since opening its offices in Dubai three years ago, conject has gone from strength to strength, supporting the sales and project management process for the likes of IKEA, Adidas, Al Zorah, and First Qatar Real Estate Development across the UAE.

At the opening of conject's new, larger premises in Dubai Internet City, Dr Uwe Forgber, Director of conject in Dubai, speaks to Property Weekly about the growth trajectory the company intends to have.

In tech-speak, conject offers construction and real estate companies 'Infrastructure Lifecycle Management Solutions'. But what does that mean to the man on the street?

In real estate, projects are typically cross-national and cross-continent — and that's what brought us here to Dubai. Just as we have done in China, Europe, and Brazil, we provide software services to clients, mainly project managers who are working with corporate entities.

conject is unique and we provide software services to those customers throughout the entire lifecycle of the given building or property. During the design, planning and construction phases, and in all property management, you always need data relating to the building, and we simply provide our clients with a platform to manage this data.

We're the only provider of this platform in this region and we're very successful.

conject claims to help customers by saving time, saving money, and offering transparency. How does this work in practice?

If companies don't use our software, the project management process will be much slower and use much more manpower. For example, we've worked with IKEA for the past seven years and we've worked on their main issue, which is time to market for new stores.

IKEA required 18 months in the very beginning from the start of a planning phase for a new market until it opened. With conject they cut that down from 18 months to six to eight months.



They streamlined the process using our software. conject is all about reducing time to market, and it's what our customers in the UAE and in the Middle East really like. A lot of these companies have a lot of money and commercial dreams and they want to realise those dreams as quickly as possible.

You have an international portfolio of blue chip clients such as IKEA, Audi and BMW. Who are you working with in the UAE?

One of our clients is Dubai World Central and we started working with DWC three years ago to support the sales and project management process, and we worked with its holding company when it set up the project for Dubai Airport. We are currently working on a huge project in Ajman called Al Zorah.

We provide the project management with our system and they run the project base using our technology; up to 2,000 people will be involved in six months

from now. We're also heavily involved in a project called Ain Al Faydah, and we provide project management for several buildings at this oasis town in Al Ain.

And, we're involved in the Adidas headquarters in Jebel Ali, which will be a flagship store as Adidas will serve the whole region, right out to South Africa, from Dubai. We also work with IKEA, and on The Pearl in Qatar. We have a lot of projects going on here.

How is your software typically being used by a client?

It used to be that humans did everything, but then they started to use machinery to compensate for that — and it's exactly the same story with us. We have software to compensate what developers need in manpower at the moment, so that they become faster and require less manpower, and so it becomes cheaper for them.

The project manager has to have an overview of the entire project or development, and our software makes all the information that the project manager needs available. It's unbelievable how often the information is not available to the people who really need it; they're craving a system like ours that makes it transparent what they have to deal with.

It's the same for drawings. The architect comes up with a genius design, but the problem is that the engineers, the owner, and the prospective buyers have no clue what the architect has in mind because the information can't reach them, or at least not in time. We hold the key to information, drawings and project management.

Do clients have to be technology whiz kids to use your software though?

No. It's up to us to be the computer geniuses! We have tried to design the software to be as simple and user-friendly as possible.

Software is a nightmare for many people and companies try and supply corporates with very complex systems for their internal processes. Software is hated and people don't like software that they can't understand.

Our software is so simple that our clients don't have to focus on its functionality, instead they have to focus on making their work better and that's the core work of a good project manager. Our software makes it easier to exchange documents, to call for action within a supply chain, and so on.

Why did conject decide to move to Dubai in 2005?

Well, we were split on the decision at first. On the one hand there was the potential of lots of construction work and real estate opportunities in the Middle East. We acknowledged that and there was so much more going on than in Europe or the US, and we needed to look for a way to participate.

But, on the other hand, we saw that there were some risks involved. At first we didn't understand the business model of Dubai. I thought that they were spending all their oil money and once it's over, the show is over.

But now I realise that it has a lot more substance and Dubai is attracting a lot of money from all over the world, and so many companies and corporate government are involved in Dubai. We now believe that Dubai is very sustainable, and it was exactly the right place for conject to become involved in.

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How does Dubai fit into conject's plans to expand across the Middle East?

We already have some large-scale projects quite far away from Dubai, but Dubai itself is the hub of our activity. One of these projects is the new Khartoum Airport in Sudan, and we hope to add a lot of value to it and then work on more projects like this from Dubai. We have projects in Vietnam, Malaysia, and in Kazakhstan — and all these large-scale projects are managed from Dubai. This is a great place to operate from. Our products are available in 15 different lan-

guages so we're very well prepared for spreading out across the globe.

We set up an office locally and we hire local staff as projects require. There is a lot of opportunity here but there are other bigger opportunities out there too. Doha, for instance, will undergo a very intense period of real estate activity over the next five to 10 years. A lot of companies who have invested in Dubai are now interested in Doha, and it's very good that we are based here in Dubai so that we can travel to these places with those companies.

Saudi Arabia is seeking a lot of help from Western companies, from experienced real estate companies, and they use Dubai as a hub to get in touch with the resources they need. Dubai is a communication hub for many large-scale projects.

Your motto here is 'Combining German Engineering with Arabian Hospitality'. How are you achieving this here?

I believe that the region has the potential and the right educated people to run a branch of conject or a hub, like the office in

Dubai itself. We hired a substantial number of people from the region and they have worked here with Europeans.

Even on the management level, I want people from the region to take over or significantly support conject. In a few years, conject in Dubai will be a UAE-style company, we don't want to be viewed as an old-style European company.

As told to Carli Smithers, Freelance Writer



Photo: Ashraf Farooq