



Tim Mahon

MASA Group's International Mindset Giving it the Almost Magical Touch

MASA Group, headquartered in Paris, is one of those small companies – around 40-50 people – that consistently punches above its weight. Specialists in the application of artificial intelligence based software to the world of defence and security simulation solutions, the company has undergone a radical transformation over the last five years. Juan-Pablo Torres, the company's energetic CEO, takes up the story.

"The [business] model has changed entirely since 2011. Originally a service provider selling effort measured in man days to a single customer – the French Army – we have transformed our business completely so that we are now a product and services enterprise: We develop intellectual property and provide a product for end users that is both scalable and ultimately more cost-effective to operate. The result has been as we hoped for – moving from a company whose revenues were based 80-85% on services to one in which 70% of the revenues now come from the sale of product and licenses," Juan-Pablo Torres, MASA Group's CEO says.

This change in orientation has been followed by two other principal paths of development; geographic expansion and sector diversification. Having been previously focused on a single customer in one nation, MASA Group now has end users in more than 15 countries as far apart as Brazil and Bangladesh. Torres is particularly proud of this achievement, since it mirrors exactly the vision he painted for the company when he became CEO. *"It has been far from a simple thing to accomplish, but the disciplines and practices we have developed and refined will continue to bear fruit,"* he says, adding that exciting announcements regarding increasing the number of countries using SWORD – MASA's flagship product – may be sooner rather than later.

Diversification has taken place into largely adjacent markets such as emergency services and first responders, whose requirements for constructive training in the synthetic environment mirrors much of the military domain's needs. There are significant differences in the market cultures, however, and subtle variances in the way in which individual and team training takes place.

To this end, MASA has developed a customised product from SWORD for the emergency management market. Dubbed SYNERGY, it has already been in use with one client since 2014 and is being evaluated by a broad swathe of agencies and organisations across MASA's global market. To fully leverage the potential of these non-military markets, the company created a subsidiary, Craft.ai, to leverage their intellectual property in discrete international sectors.

"The three axes of development that have brought us this far will be continued, but there are two additional major drivers that feature in our growth plans," he says. One is to scale SWORD even further than it has already been – principally upwards from its traditional use at the brigade and divisional levels. *"We are seeing demand for using SWORD to train joint and inter-service command staff – and perhaps lower as well, at battalion or even company level,"* he explains.

The second new approach mirrors something happening right across the training community. As operations become more fluid and individualised and as the spectre of irregular, asymmetric warfare exercises the minds of operational and theatre commanders – as well as their home base masters – the requirement to be able to use the synthetic environment for mission



(Photo: MASA Group)

planning and even mission rehearsal grows apace. Interestingly, from MASA's perspective, this opens up a whole new budget line for them to address, which Torres and his team plan on doing with the gusto their customers and peers have become accustomed to. *"We have a solution that is applicable to an entirely different community from our traditional customer base, and we feel we have legitimate grounds for confidence we can leverage our experience and business methodologies to meet the demands arising from a section of the military customer that lies outside the training sphere,"* he says.

Asked what characterises the company's success to date – and where its future lies – Torres believes the answer to be a simple one. But just because it's simple does not make it any less powerful. *"Its people who are passionate about what they do, have an increasingly customer-focused attitude and use technology as the basis from which to develop the relationship – not the end on itself,"* he says. Although technology is central to the company's business, it addresses it with what Torres describes as a 'light' approach – which is unusual at this end of the supply chain, to be frank.

The clarity of the business practices the group pursues, however, are key to past and future success. *"Our flexibility, agility and capability as a company in adapting to changing requirements models is a key factor – one that everybody in the company understands,"* he says. By comparison with the traditional model of the industry giving way to the large scale integrators, working on multi-billion dollar contracts in which it may take three to five years to implement a perfect solution, MASA's approach denies this is any longer a sustainable business model and focuses instead on that agility Torres has already emphasised.

"We will do whatever is necessary in order to meet the customer's demand. If that means using a local value added reseller in a specific market, for instance, we'll do just that. Or we will put our own people in country to install, implement and train the users as well as to support the product over time." Both those approaches were used in tandem in winning and implementing the contract won recently with the Brazilian Army – a \$7 million contract that more than adequately showcases what can be done by a small enterprise: *"Companies of all sizes and natures have a role to play as the market continues to evolve – and that role can be a fulfilling and profitable one for all concerned. But it needs to be done in collaboration rather than in competition. The old world just is not going to cut it for much longer."*

And what might be on his wishlist – apart from several more Brazilian-style contracts in rapid succession? *"Procurement reform – or at least acceleration of the process – would be an enormous step forward. There are encouraging moves in this direction in all our markets, but even the process of change seems to be interminable. Internally, one of the great treasures that characterises MASA Group is the international mindset of the whole team. We have at least ten different nationalities working in the group and I really wish we could find more of the almost magical touch that this multiculturalism brings us. That is what I would like – but I suppose it is now my job to go and find a way of making that happen,"* he concludes with a smile.

Which proves that, like his company, Juan-Pablo Torres is not only an ambitious man but one with a clear vision of what sets the company, the product and above all the team apart.



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