

“WE ARE A SERIOUS STARTUP”

July 28, 2021



One of the co-founders of C&S Partners talks to us about the company’s unique strategy, the secrets of its success so far, and what lies ahead – and what doesn’t – for the firm.

YOU’RE CELEBRATING C&S PARTNERS’S THIRD ANNIVERSARY. WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR YOU?

Gérald Bouhourd. Strategy is something we explain afterwards, right?! In fairness, and back in 2018 when Fernand and I created C&S, it was by accident; we did not know what to expect. The two of us were released from any other duties; trust and friendship were there; and we shared strong convictions about what a great consulting firm should look like. So we gave it a try and created Concrete & Steel Partners – our official name at this point. Then in 2019 – and credit goes to our clients – the concept got validated without any strong business development effort. Clients and prospects were just calling us. This created the necessary boost to formalize C&S Partners’s value offer, which you can read on our website, and form a world-class advisory board to advise and challenge us.

Believe it or not, the real pivot came with the first lockdown in March 2020. Fernand was stuck in Brazil delivering a client engagement and I was stuck in Euskal Herria [Basque Country], with neither of us being able to travel anymore. But our customers kept on trusting us, maintaining ongoing engagements on a remote basis. With all the time saved not going on our usual travels, we could spend time on formalizing our branding and, more importantly, attracting top talent and striking strategic partnerships – like the one we have with Hogan Assessments – on a global basis. Over a few months we formed what C&S

Partners looks like today: a gang of 11 top-caliber partners, with a little help from the market. We were lean and agile, while the large consulting networks were facing the pandemic tsunami.

The next pivot happened early in 2021 when, thanks to Melanie, one of our newest hires, we began digitalizing many of our advisory methodologies, drawing on what we learned from a year of lockdowns and leveraging efficient technologies even when we work face-to-face.

YOU'VE BEEN VERY VISIBLE, WINNING STRATEGIC ASSIGNMENTS IN THE ENERGY SECTOR AND IN THE LEADERSHIP ADVISORY SPACE. WHAT TYPE OF COMPETITORS HAVE YOU BEEN FACING?

This is a big paradox. C&S Partners is a boutique but in a vast majority of cases we compete with large consulting networks. And we generally win! That's probably why we sit next to, if not ahead of, big names in various rankings in France or the UK.

HOW WOULD YOU EXPLAIN THIS?

I would say there are two reasons. First, we acknowledge our degree of specialization: vertically, in energy transition in large, asset-driven industries where we have the experience to deliver many complex projects, ranging from early strategy definition to full implementation through people; and horizontally, where our convictions in leadership development and team effectiveness cut across many sectors.

Second, and unlike a number of other firms, we are a team of senior partners having both executive/operational and advisory track records, hence the experience, as well as the empathy and sometimes even wisdom, to support complex transformations combining strategic, organizational and people-centric dimensions. And this combination proves to be important for our clients who are driving the energy transition, for example. In short, there is no secret sauce: just focus and seniority.

TELL US MORE ABOUT YOUR VALUES AND YOUR "RAISON D'ÊTRE", STARTING WITH YOUR MOTTO, "MATERIALIZING LEADERSHIP".

Beyond the important notion of being "material", meaningful – which is a key motivation for us—the brand, "Materializing Leadership," encompasses everything we do: we help individuals, teams and organizations materialize their leadership. This can mean, for example,

becoming a successful executive, an effective team, or a winning organization that acquires others.

As I mentioned, Fernand and I were driven by convictions about what a great consulting firm should look like, and what it shouldn't: both in terms of client centricity and internal horizontal collaboration. Back in 2020 and when we formalized our new C&S branding, we just asked our customers how they perceived us. They came back with key words such as "honesty," "transparency" and "impact". Our response was, "Great! We can definitely live with and by those values."

What's more, we practice what we preach: as a team of partners, we went through our own team effectiveness exercise, defining our purpose, shared accountabilities, etc. We concluded that our reason for being is (and please excuse our French, as our English-speaking colleagues like to say): "To solidify, grow and perpetuate C&S as a serious start-up. No BS. No assholes." (The latter having already been extolled by Stanford's Bob Sutton.)

YOU HAVE SAID THAT C&S PARTNERS'S OPERATING PRINCIPLE IS "YOU EAT WHAT YOU EAT". WHAT DOES THIS REALLY MEAN?

This obviously references the famous "You eat what you kill" principle in place in many consulting firms. As I said, Fernand and I share strong views on what to do and, just as importantly, what not to do! For us, the "eat what you kill" principle is nonsense. First and foremost because it's misaligned with the clients' interests: we've never seen a client who's happy simply to have been sold an engagement, while remaining unconcerned about seeing results – which means delivering impact and help them progress. Second, it creates internal tensions between those who "sell" and those who "deliver". As C&S Partners, we decided to keep it simple: clients form our purpose; delivering results to them is our shared accountability; and collaborating amongst ourselves for a higher impact is our duty.

THREE YEARS DOWN THE ROAD, WHAT REMAINS FROM THE ORIGINAL CONCRETE & STEEL PARTNERS NAME?

It's obviously a challenge to spell "Concrete & Steel Partners" whenever we're at the reception desk of our clients. C&S makes it easier! But still, the original underlying values are there: we are "concrete", with everything it means in terms of being material and down to earth; and we're "steel", which means both solid and a bit rigid from time to time!

It's extremely rewarding to see that our first clients from 2018 and 2019 still call us "Concrete & Steel", and not C&S. It means a lot for them, and so also for us.

"RIGID"? DOESN'T THAT SOUND A BIT NEGATIVE OR AT LEAST DIVISIVE?

At least it's controversial. We acknowledge that we won't work for everybody. And we're happy that those who like us or not, form their judgement on good reasons! We are super flexible, and even creative, on how we structure our engagements, yet rigid on our ethics and convictions. This is a way to materialize our commitment to our "No BS" principle.

THIS IS THE THIRD ANNIVERSARY OF C&S. WHAT'S THE STRATEGY FOR THE NEXT 3 YEARS?

This has been a question back-and-forth – and still is – between all of us and our Advisory Board. Our position, today, is this: "C&S pursues a growth strategy without precise goals". One of the former Global Managing Directors of a well-known consulting firm once said, "We stopped being who we were the day we became a business and no longer a profession." This may sound a bit naïve, but it says a lot for us. Our purpose can't be disconnected from the interest of our clients, and growth can't be at the detriment to the quality of the results we deliver to them. So, our growth very much depends on our ability to keep attracting the best people in the market and innovating the way we have done so far. Our focus now is to be successful in the new geographies we just opened, like Israel and the UK.

YOU'RE VERY CENTERED AROUND EUROPE AND THE US. WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO BE PRESENT IN ISRAEL, TOO?

Thanks to our clients, we also deliver assignments in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and South-East Asia. Israel was an obvious decision as it is a land of promising innovation, too. We'll communicate more broadly about that in September, but in addition to having the right colleague with Lydia in Tel Aviv, we are going to innovate a lot when it comes to leadership development. Stay tuned, more to come – including many things we ourselves don't know yet!



For more information, go visit our website : www.concretesteelpartners.com

Follow us on [LinkedIn](#)