

Mind the obstacles

... but stay focused, chairman Courtot of Qualys tells technopreneurs

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■ ■ USING extreme skiing as an analogy, Qualys Inc chairman and chief executive officer (and extreme sports enthusiast) Philippe Courtot had these words of wisdom for aspiring technopreneurs: "What I have learned in extreme skiing is that you want to look at the obstacles but you don't want to stare at them, because if you look at them too much you will crash."

These obstacles are like the competition and many companies fail because they look at the competition rather than the path, which in this case should be their customers, Mr Courtot said.

Since leaving France for Silicon Valley in 1987, he has headed a number of small technology firms such as cc:Mail and Signio, which he transformed into successful million-dollar enterprises.

Mr Courtot entered the information technology industry as a representative of an American computer company in France – a job he took on with no knowledge of what a computer was, much less an ability to speak English.

All he knew was that he wanted to "go into an industry of the future".

Six months later, he clinched a deal, selling computers to the government of France.

Perhaps inspired by his humble beginnings, Mr Courtot said this about entrepreneurship: "What makes an entrepreneur is exactly what makes an immigrant. An immigrant has enough confidence in himself to take risks to find a better future."

Qualys provides security services to help customers identify network vulnerabilities. It uses software that simulates a hacker's mind.

Instead of offering it as a traditional enterprise software solution, Qualys leverages on its unique deployment of the software as a service.

This saves its clients the complications that come with installation, maintenance and updating.

Among Qualys' clients in the region are SingTel, Standard Chartered Bank, Asia Pacific Breweries and ABN Amro.

On the secret of his success, Mr Courtot said with a laugh: "Maybe it's because I'm crazy!"

In a more serious tone, he added: "Every new technology has a curve whereby you need many inventions in between to make it secure and cost-effective.

"I have always focused on trying to determine if there is a purpose for an application and when it is ready to go to the masses."

Mr Courtot also stressed the virtues of hard work.

"You have to do a lot of work. That's what I have been doing, being there at the right time and putting in a lot of effort to create a new market place."

Stay in Asia. You can go to the US to get the experience, but don't think of immigrating.

– Mr Courtot's advice to local technopreneurs, based on his conviction that a new Industrial Revolution is taking place in Asia on a magnified scale

Mr Courtot's affinity for small firms could have something to do with his view of large companies.

"Most of the time, the bigger companies are late because it is unfortunately inherent in human nature.

"You become comfortable and you see the world only through your own eyes and you lose the ability to understand other things – you are very centred on what you do. The bigger companies don't see when something is changing."

The extreme skier in Mr Courtot plays a role in his approach to the world of IT: One of his strategies for Qualys is "penetrating the market fast".

He noted that "in technology, the winner takes all. Interoperability problems make it hard for more than one operator to exist. If you want to create credible value,



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you need to have enough critical mass".

"The best way to create critical mass is to eliminate the problems in deployment," he said.

Therefore, a firm should concern itself with what it needs to do to satisfy its customers and accelerate market penetration.

"The rest takes care of itself", Mr Courtot said.

But even he accepts that there is one business philosophy that stands contrary to the notion of speed.

"You hire slow and you fire fast," Mr Courtot said of the management of human resources.

He admitted that his was a somewhat harsh approach but one that he feels is necessary.

"Hiring is the most difficult thing and if you hire 50 per cent right you have done a good job. A lot of companies make the mistake of looking only at a person's specific area of expertise, which is important but it's the second most important thing," Mr Courtot said.

"The most important thing is the fabric of the individual. I will always make the trade-off between somebody who has a lot of core qualities and less expertise, and somebody with a lot of expertise but whose core qualities are very questionable," he added.

He advised local technopreneurs to focus on the region. He said that the Industrial Revolution that took place in Europe and America is now taking place in Asia on a magnified scale.

"Stay in Asia. You can go to the US to get the experience, but don't think of immigrating."

Asked what drives him in life, the avid hiker, mountain biker and windsurfer had this to say: "One big driving force in life for me is curiosity. I'm still fascinated by the universe. The other force is creativity."

Ever spontaneous and game for a challenge, he said: "If a space-ship comes down now and offers me a trip, I'll go. I'm ready."