

The Presidential Suite

Interview with Raf Meersman, President, FTTH Council Europe
By Melissa Cogavin, Managing Editor, SCTE

Raf Meersman is known to many as the founder of automated planning software company Comsof, based in Ghent, Belgium. Acquired last August by IQGeo, the company has gone from strength to strength over the past ten years and Raf, Senior Vice President at IQGeo has recently been elected as President to the Board of Directors at the FTTH Council. A voluntary role, Raf took time out to talk to Broadband Journal about his recent appointment and vision for the Council going forward.



Raf Meersman.
EMEA General Manager,
IQGeo

What's your vision for the role as you take over, what you are hoping to achieve?

RM: Well, first of all, I'm certainly not planning a revolution. I think the council has proven its value to the industry over the years and my goal is to build on this positive legacy. My predecessor, Eric Festraets, did a great job, so

I want to continue the work he and the team have started.

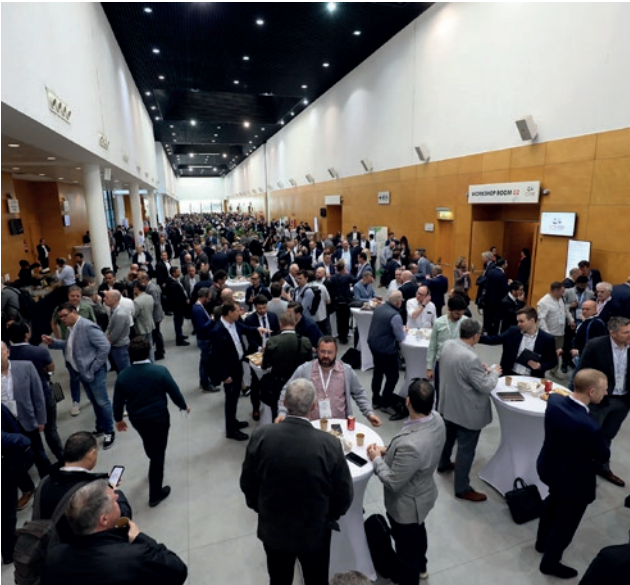
Business conditions and technology is constantly changing and I do think it's important to ensure that the council remains relevant for the market. For example, as fibre is deployed across Europe, the Council needs to continue its shift from fibre advocacy to supporting the industry long-term.

The fibre roll out in Europe is arguably mission-accomplished now; certainly the awareness is there. What role does the FTTH Council Europe play now that its most pressing objective has been met?

RM: It's true that fibre rollout in Europe has been growing significantly and is now well above 50% as the council's Panorama reports show. But it's worthwhile to highlight that there remain significant

differences in coverage on a country by country level so certainly that work is not over. At the same time we started making a shift towards prioritising adoption now, because this is still lagging. As an industry organisation, we need to play a bigger role in helping the market increase fibre adoption across





Europe, plus continue on the path of fibre-to-the-everything. It's not just about fibre to the home, but also seeing how the market can ensure fibre becomes the go-to infrastructure for all kinds of telecom applications as there are tremendous potential benefits.

Adoption is certainly worth promoting. Anything else?

RM: Sustainability is also a big focus for the Council and the industry going forward and this has an impact on many challenges facing the market. Overall we see many additional areas where the Council can be an excellent forum for important issues, and we believe that bringing the different actors together and stimulating networking and conversations around these topics is crucial to accelerating solutions.

On a personal level what are you hoping to achieve?

RM: I have a very collaborative approach and want to ensure that all the members were represented by the Board and across the organisation. It's a very knowledgeable and interesting community that is increasingly diverse and this diversity must be reflected across all our activities. We have many more financial investors, a growing number of operators, and of course, we have many vendors active in the market. I think it's important that we find value for all our members and stakeholders.

Many vendors are members of the council because of the FTTH Show. We need to demonstrate to them that there's many more benefit than just the event. We're part of a big ecosystem and actively participating in committees, meetings and initiatives that offer many compelling business benefits.





The more you put in the more you get out of it. So, with the election process, were you up against lots of other people? Was it very competitive?

RM: The election of a president is typically not very competitive. At least those I have witnessed have reached a consensus very quickly. In my case I was very happy to see the support I got from the whole board. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity for me, having been involved with the council for so many years.

I am really honored to take up the role, working with a board that is really engaged and collaborates well.

It sounds like quite a nice, close-knit community.

RM: Yes it is, and this was very clear when Covid hit. It was pretty intense during this challenging time and the Board had to work closely together to postpone events, move online and find solutions. It all required a lot of discussion and extra work. We had a very engaged Board, which is important in times of crisis.

Crisis does bring you closer together.

RM: I have to say a big thank you to Eric Festraets for his leadership during the first year of Covid. The amount of extra work he needed to do due to the Covid crisis was incredible. He really did well keeping the organisation on the right path while phased with such an unseen situation. I do hope that we such a crisis will not come back any time soon.

Oh please no. Once every hundred years is enough, isn't it?

RM: Absolutely. Hopefully, we can focus on issues that will drive the fibre industry forward.

Looking ahead, what would you say are the greatest challenges facing the FTTH right now as you're taking up this role?

RM: Good question. As I said, we are broadening our scope, expanding our activities also into fibre adoption and industry sustainability. I think one of the Council challenges it to keep pushing to be heard at a European commission level, which is not an easy task.

In the policy and regulation committee we are seeing some interesting debate, and learning how we can bring different opinions together into one statement that benefits the whole fibre market.

Our membership roster, events and committees continue to grow and we should raise our profile as Europe's leading fibre industry organisation.

That's good. Do you get involved with the show?

RM: No. As a Board, we obviously are informed and support the event by suggesting potential speakers or topics. The practical organisation is with the management team, and they do a great job. As a president, there's no additional

responsibility for event activities. Naturally, I will be more visible at the event, opening sessions and being the keynote speaker.

What do you think has helped propel you to this role, and what do you think got you the job?

RM: I have been active in the council for more than 10 years, and when I started I looked up to the Presidents at the time and never thought I would end up in that role. But I have really enjoyed engaging with the organisation, taking part in studies, committee work, general assemblies and convincing other members to take the most out of the membership. It's about getting involved in activities, which creates a valuable business and personal network.

My curiosity and willingness to get involved was crucial to getting onto the Board, because we were a relatively small company and many of the Board seats are occupied by

people from huge organisations. I like to think that I earned my place on the Board and now as President, through hard work and my creative input.

I believe that three years of active participation on the Board apparently convinced the other Board members that I would be a good President and I thank them for their trust. I'm also really grateful to the management of IQGeo that I am getting their full support to take up this role. I'm looking forward to an exciting year and a great event in Berlin in March!



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