



IT: profile



Mark Barnett



# Plutonic Zoo

Mark talks with a Co-founder and Managing Director of Plutonic Zoo - Victor Konijn, and gets to know a highly evolved species in uncovering some deep insightful thinking.

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## MARK- Why did Plutonic Zoo start?

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VICTOR: In 2001 a group of us all coming from big service companies, shared the same frustrations about being restricted by our business systems and methodologies which made our offerings way too expensive. We were in a position of having to use resources that were being underutilised rather than the resources that the project demanded. This meant higher expenses and a lower quality of work. So we felt that a different model of service delivery was needed. And that's why Plutonic Zoo started – turning frustration into an opportunity.

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MARK- We all wonder 'what's in a name' and Plutonic Zoo is one of those names that must have come from a really creative session. What's the story behind that?

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VICTOR- We wanted to express that we had the energy and vitality to make a difference. It is about being precise and focussing on doing exactly what is needed. This comes from being really client focused and being flexible about how you adapt one's methodology to suit the client. It requires a greater maturity and ability to tune into each client's need. We have to know what our client knows and what our client doesn't know so we can take them to a better place. It's about helping our clients to reach their goal by using all the experience we have to add value to the relationship. Plutonic really comes from the intensity of bringing to a client what they need, not more and not less.

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## MARK - and the Zoo?

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VICTOR- This came from the same frustration we found in working for the big service companies as it seemed that nobody was impartial. Most service companies have invested in particular expertise which often sits idle. The intention is to make those idle people 'billable'. In doing this you don't always get the resources that are the best fit for the client. The idle people become the 'experts'. To counter that the Zoo approach is an associate model – none are on our payroll and therefore we have individuals and companies that are called on an "as needs basis". We work with a large number of people to ensure that we have the resources available and the depth of expertise to bring to a particular project. These people are our Zoo members that are called upon when a relevant project is found. What we have developed is the infrastructure to manage the process of bringing the right people to the project, and supporting them. We operate as a team towards our client through active involvement of our leadership team, and offsite Zoo members.

We still get calls from people asking us about lions and tigers, but we say our group is a broad collection of an exotic species – in our case 'humans'.

They are special and are made up of "techies", business-, project-, and communication professionals, all experts in their own niche. We also have domain expertise coming from aged care, finance and other areas that we add when needed.

An interesting by-product of this model is that we almost always have a team of enthusiastic experts working together creating their own dynamics and energy that add value for our clients. It also means that the client gets exactly the expertise they need.

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MARK- Victor, can you describe a typical project?

VICTOR- No, that doesn't exist, as every engagement is different. There is nothing we do over and over again. We help clients to execute their initiatives professionally. This could be the implementation of a software product or even the development of an IT strategy or a governance framework. It could also be getting the business processes sorted out. We can split our engagements into four high level categories:

1. **Advisory services** – this may include raising the client's awareness of what the market is doing and what the client could do, helping them understand what they are getting themselves into and bring their dream back into their comfort zone;
2. **Planning services** – this might include doing a business analysis, writing a tender or helping with product selection. At the project level we help the client prepare for implementing their investment. It often relates to fundamental IT planning issues;
3. **Implementation services** – to make sure the implementation is a success which could involve project management or simply complement the project with onsite expertise. This is more than a body-shopping approach through the active support of our leadership team. We call it managed expertise. It is about using the expertise of the entire Zoo to complement the resources of the client; and
4. **Recovery Services** – this involves stepping in where things have gone wrong – the client may be fighting with the supplier and the project has stalled. In the traditional situation under these circumstances it may escalate to the legal sector and a proper fight becomes imminent. Our experience is that by getting the lawyers involved may get one party a bag of money but the original problem that was to be solved by the project remains after the fight is over. So we step in to help sort out the project problems. It could be a technical problem, a project management problem, a commercial one and in practise it's typically a combination of these. We tackle communication issues explicitly as they are so often the cause of other issues. So we try to resolve these issues as an independent party to bring the project back on the rails and achieving the initial goals of the project. Seeing the situation from a broader perspective is key.

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MARK- Is it tricky being the Zoo keeper?

VICTOR- Yes, and you have to love it. It has become an organic model which is nothing like what we started with 8 years ago. It is tricky but not difficult. There are issues of availability as we cannot always guarantee availability of a particular individual, and we need to deal with that through our flexibility. The solution comes down to an acknowledgement that no project hangs on one person and each one requires a broad access to a range of expertise with the right personal approach. It's creative – never boring – we are not interested in building up IP as we are happy not doing the same thing day after day. Every project adds to our experience but we are not into making the client believe there is only one way to do things. Hence, we don't get into a situation where we are compromised by having to recommend a specific way of doing things. Everything we do becomes client owned – they love it and we love it because we can continue to use our creativity.

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MARK- Do you have some nervousness about where the next project will come from or is your business mature enough to be over that hump?

VICTOR- We are dependent on referrals and word of mouth and as we know one bad story gets ten times the press of a good story, but yes that nervousness dissipates as the years go by. We are very keen not to oversell and hence we try to manage the client's expectation as well as we can. This is important because some clients are dreamers and are unrealistic.

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MARK- So what would your message to aged care be?

VICTOR- The IT industry and the Aged Care industry have a different way of thinking and successfully working together comes from both sides to move to a more middle ground. Aged Care has more of a compassionate focus which often doesn't gel with the more rigid IT approach.

So, my message to aged care would be to start with some self reflections and know who you are and know what is important to you. Then put this into a project perspective and share it with your software vendors. Once you have done that – vendor de-selection will take place and this is very powerful and serves to not waste anyone's time. The better one is able to characterise ones-selves the more one is able to be clear on expectations of external parties.



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MARK- You told me you used to be Dutch, does that mean you are not Aussie?

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VICTOR- I was born Dutch and my wife Toni concedes that you can take the Dutch out of the Netherlands but you can't take the Netherlands out of the Dutch. I am an Aussie in both formality and spirit. We have been here 11 years and have 3 kids – 9, 8 and 6 - all born here.

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MARK- Where did you meet Toni?

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VICTOR- I met Toni in Spain.

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MARK- Is there a romantic story I should know about?

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VICTOR- Yes there is, but I'll tell you about that another time.



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MARK- what do you do to relax?

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VICTOR- I'm not sure that relaxation is the right word but I'm part of Surf Lifesaving Club and I busily get bruised in IRB's (Inflatable Rescue Boat). The kids got me involved in this and it's great fun to be part of the community in the northern beaches of Sydney. I joined when the kids joined Nippers.