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He first came in during the early nineties when he started the adventure of The Prague Tribune magazine.

THE HEADHUNTER

Philippe Riboton is probably the only hunter whose "victims" willingly and gladly look for him. He is a headhunter, a man who finds the best managerial minds for top European companies.

Text: Petr Kain

PHILIPPE Riboton came to Prague in the early 90s when Czechoslovakia began to breathe freely. The young Frenchman was enchanted by the atmosphere and decided to stay. He founded a cult business and lifestyle magazine called *The Prague Tribune* and a recruitment agency, *Synergie*. Today, Riboton "hunts" for the best and brightest managerial minds across Europe.

Tell me, how did you get into journalism?

I studied political sciences at the Political Sciences Institute in France, which is the classical route for people who then progress in the public sector, in politics or in the media. I nearly went into politics myself, as just after graduation I was offered the job of assistant to a French member of parliament. But in the end I chose another way. I had started to work as a journalist in a regional daily newspaper already during my studies. At that time, I felt that I was born to be a journalist; it was exactly what I wanted to do in my life. It was an extremely varied job and I wrote about everything, politics, business, culture, celebrities (which was great fun), and even about

crime, which was a terrific experience. Then I moved to Paris and began working in a magazine focusing on marketing and communication, where I also met my future business partners. They were from southeast France where they had a communications agency and they wanted to open a branch in Paris. We agreed that I would manage it. I was about twenty-three years old and after three years I realized that I didn't need any partners. After all, I had established and managed the Paris branch on my own. So we broke up, I renamed the company and continued to work in Paris.

What brought you to Prague?

It was due to a person who is quite well known here: Jean-François Ott. We were mates during our studies and he was and still is my best friend. At that time, he was just starting out in Prague with his development company Orco, so I came to see him and finally settled here. By the way, I was Jean-François's first tenant in his first real estate project at Americka 17, and we were also partners in a recruitment company we founded.

You also founded *The Prague Tribune* business magazine. What was it like doing business right after the fall of communism?

It was the most adventurous, fascinating and enriching experience of my life. These were the years when the most common sentence I heard was: "It's not possible." Whatever you wanted to do, whatever you needed, you got that response. But it didn't take long for me to realize the opposite was true. Everything was possible. You only had to convince people.

Do you think it is still a problem for Czech people? That they always answer that things are not possible?

I don't think so. I think people's attitudes have changed. Perhaps even after seeing that it is possible. For instance, look at the story of Carlo Capalbo. He came up with an idea that most people thought was nonsense. Why would anyone run a marathon in Prague at that time? And look at the success he currently enjoys. I think the huge power of entrepreneurs, whether they are called Ott, Riboton or Capalbo, is that we are resilient. We hold on to the power of our idea, our project, whether the sun is shining or it's raining cats and dogs or snowing. This was also true of *The Prague Tribune*. It was a perpetual miracle that we were able to last this long. We did not have the experience or the financial background of a large business group; we only had enthusiasm and determination.

Was *The Prague Tribune* a profitable venture?

Not the first couple of years, but by the fourth and fifth year we were a little bit profitable, but then we were back in the red. On the one hand, the concept of free newspapers appeared on

the market (like *Metro*), and people got convinced they did not have to pay for the press. In addition, newspapers all suddenly went online and were mostly free. The old business model of magazines publishing quickly disintegrated, so I decided to stop publishing *The Prague Tribune*.

So, since then have you just been concentrating on your HR business?

Yes. In this company we basically were helping foreign companies and investors run their business in the Czech Republic and Slovakia and find employees; whether it was banks, insurance companies or even retail chains. At times it was challenging because we were pioneers on the Czech market. Almost no one was there before us. I will give you an example: We helped the Carrefour chain when it started operating in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. It was one of the first chains to penetrate the Czech Republic and we were supposed to find a management team for twelve hypermarkets. But how to look for the director of a future hypermarket in the Czech Republic when there was no such thing as a hypermarket here before? It's not enough to just look at a résumé; you have to find a person with the right knowledge and skills.

How did you found HR Partners?

For ten years I was the Managing Director of *Synergie* recruitment company, but I had only a one-fifth share of the business. When the majority owner refused my request to rebalance our stakes, I founded my own company *HR Partners* in 2006. The company, unlike the previous firm, focuses on finding top managers. We



operate in all of Europe but especially in Central and Eastern Europe.

Q You are a headhunter. How would you describe what you are actually doing?
I often say that a headhunter is quite comparable to a divorce lawyer. You never think you'll need one, but when the time comes, it's better to know a really good one. That's why I meet senior managers every day who are not looking for a new job, but just want to stay in the loop about what is happening in their field and the country in which they operate.

Q So, if a company is looking for a new financial director or even a CEO, can it turn to you?
Of course. As a rule, we help companies start a new management team. Nowadays, senior managers are in their positions for about three years. One year before their replacement, companies start looking

for their successors.

Q How long does it take on average to find someone?
I would say about three to six months. In the case of more complicated positions, this may take a year or longer.

Q What does a typical manager you search for look like?
Figuratively speaking, the type of people we look for have quite a specific DNA. They are managers who have experience with life in a country other than their own. They either studied or worked abroad. To give a concrete example, we recently received an assignment from a company in the Czech Republic who was looking for a Czech CEO, requiring the person to have been in the same position in the past internationally. We have been looking for such a person not only in Europe but also in North America for example.

Prague Tribune

The cult bilingual magazine focused on the Czech and international business community has been published for twelve years between 1993 and 2005. There were 11 issues published every year as well as six special editions focused on different sectors, industries and events.

Q Is it true that some managers may be unsuccessful in one company but shine in another?

Of course. There is a bit of a problem in Europe that failure is rather stigmatized. Failure is simply a failure. In the United States, they see it as an essential part of success. As a lesson for your next career step. As they say: fail, fail again, fail better.

Q Is it also true that a manager can succeed in a completely different position from what he did in his previous job?

Certainly. It is also my role to help people change environment, change the sector in which they operate. Otherwise, my job would not be too much creative like if a company sought a CFO and we would simply look for the same CFO to replace him. Also, if you want to be a really good manager, you should work in several companies

and several industries. Clearly, this does not always apply. For example, in banking or insurance you rarely find a manager who comes from a completely different field. But even there it sometimes happens.

■ **What was your most difficult assignment?**

The hardest is when there are very few potential candidates who can hold the position. For example, we have recently been looking for a CFO for a client in Turkey. The assignment called for an experienced financial director of Turkish origin, but currently operating outside Turkey. There are not so many people like that. And when you do find them, a second, more difficult task is ahead of you: convincing them to return to their native land. And that isn't easy, because there are currently two countries in Europe that are not very sexy from this point of view. The first is Ukraine and the other is Turkey.

■ **Did you finally manage to persuade someone?**

Yes, but we were lucky. One man had aging parents in Turkey who he wanted to take care of, so he accepted our offer.

■ **Has anyone ever tried to head-hunt you?**

Sure, they've tried it. But I always say that this job brings me too much pleasure. I have a great amount of freedom; I work a lot, I have four to eight meetings a day, but I am still the master of my time. And when I have only four meetings, I can fit in a visit to an art exhibition. That's amazing. Why would I change it?■

inzerce

The advertisement features a hand holding a smartphone. The screen displays a teal-colored interface for an investment offer. At the top, there is an illustration of a stack of 100 Euro banknotes. Below this, the main headline asks 'MÁTE CHUŤ VYDĚLÁVAT?' (Do you have a taste for profit?). The text describes a loan for a pizzeria or cafe, mentioning that the user and a friend have already chosen a location and that the user has used the Zonky app to secure the loan. A progress bar shows that 97% of the 200,000 Kč loan has been invested. Below the bar, a table lists the loan details: Rating 'A nižší riziko', Annual interest rate '10,99%', and Term '84 měsíců'. At the bottom, a red button with white text says 'CHCI INVESTOVAT' (I want to invest).

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