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Interview with Econocom Group founder

Jean-Louis Bouchard: “Entrepreneurship is a duty, and CSR is part of it”

While many business leaders see the ubiquitous “Corporate Social Responsibility” as an obligation or constraint imposed by experts and activists, the founding chairman of Econocom Group sees it as an opportunity and a business opening for his group, as part of an entrepreneurial vision of the future. We sit down for an exclusive interview with a major business leader who rarely appears in the media.

You have said: “*Entrepreneurship isn’t a value, it’s a duty*.” Would you say the same thing about CSR today?
Jean-Louis Bouchard: Absolutely! The truth of this statement is becoming increasingly evident. You know, I come from a family of military officers and public servants. But I felt that the future lay in entrepreneurship rather than the military career my father imagined for me. Entrepreneurs are fortunate in France in that society today provides everything they need to do business under proper conditions, from trained personnel to social and medical protection, administrative services and financial resources. Everything is done in our country to allow them to do business as securely as possible. So it is up to them to seize this opportunity and play the game. Entrepreneurship is more than ever a civic duty today, and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is part of that duty.

You do not feature largely in the media, but you have agreed to talk about CSR today. Why is that so? To show that your group *Econocom* is animated first and foremost by an entrepreneurial spirit and vision?
J-L. B.: Véronique Di Benedetto, Vice-Chairwoman of Econocom France, who manages CSR in our group and has worked alongside me for over 30 years, can testify that this topic has always been a concern for me right from the group’s foundation 48 years ago. Perhaps by chance but maybe not, Corporate Social Responsibility is part of my DNA and that of my company, and the group’s vocation from the outset has been to bring the circular economy into the digital sector.
During my early days as an entrepreneur after leaving IBM, I started buying and selling computers, and I soon started refurbishing used equipment as a means of avoiding waste. I have consistently advocated the circular economy ever since. If Econocom has become a major player in the digital transformation of companies and public services, it is because we are constantly striving to provide customers and their users with effective and responsible digital solutions that generate a positive impact. That means, first, having a responsible commitment ourselves, second, guiding our

customers towards more responsible usage, and third, bringing together an entire ecosystem to create shared value.

At *Econocom*, you have made CSR a tool that is completely integrated into the business, which is quite unique. What does that mean in practical terms?

J-L. B.: We have an original vision of CSR that is above all pragmatic in that it generates business opportunities. At Econocom, we do not see CSR as a constraint; on the contrary, it has always been an integral part of our business. It means knowing how to take risks, test, innovate and create value for customers - but it is also central to our business of digital transformation. It's important to remember that the digital sector's carbon footprint represents roughly 4% of the global total and is increasing by about 10% each year. So we cannot sit idly by. Econocom is neither an equipment manufacturer nor a software publisher. We are a go-between allowing sellers to connect with buyers. And among our many engagements alongside them, we advise them on how to maximise their green impact, helping them choose the best solution to their environmental concerns, including the best choice for the environment between new or used equipment and in-company or cloud-based data storage. Our job is to identify the most responsible option. To achieve that, we measure the equipment's carbon footprint (choosing the greenest) and we manage energy in buildings with that in mind.

Your entrepreneurial approach to CSR is reflected in three circular economy pillars: customers, employees and the ecosystem.

We've just talked about customers, so what about employees?

J-L. B.: This aspect can be illustrated on many levels. In terms of human resources, for instance, we promote gender diversity at the highest level, with women making up 40% of our senior management team. We also hire persons with disabilities every year, and there are currently 177 at Econocom France. We ensure that all digital systems have a positive environmental impact, without forgetting our buildings and vehicle fleet. This approach has allowed us to reduce our carbon footprint by 49.70% over the past three years. Another point is that our refurbished equipment is supplied by companies from the social economy, which has contributed to the creation of about 30 jobs among our partners.

The third pillar of your CSR policy is the ecosystem, with the aim of creating shared value. Can you give us some examples?

J-L. B.: The best examples are the partnerships we are forging with non-profits or organisations providing education in digital transformation. Econocom has long been committed to eliminating the digital divide, notably by supporting numerous non-profits working in the field of education and by financing companies in a position to radically transform the education and in-service training sectors. To that end, the group has invested around €13 million in start-ups over the past few years, either directly or via private equity funds, including €4 million specifically dedicated to digital education and narrowing the digital divide from an early age. Among the main investments is the Educapital fund headed by two women, one of whom, Marie-Christine Levet, is on Econocom's Board of Directors. Educapital invests in the best EdTechs to promote innovative and quality education accessible to as many people as possible. Alongside this commitment, we have invested directly in two promising education start-ups: Magic Makers, which helps children to master digital technology from a very early age, and Kartable, a tutoring platform that offers students across the board the chance to take distance learning courses and succeed in school at very little cost (from €8 per month).

“Entrepreneurship is the noblest of adventures. Young people should not be afraid...”

You are leading a group with 9,200 employees. The new millennials generation clearly expects their work to be meaningful and have the best possible environmental impact. Is that your commitment when hiring new talent?
J-L. B.: Obviously, because companies become strong by giving meaning to shared collective work. Companies are born, they live, and they die. They are living organisms. When we create a company, we know that it may die one day, which is why it is imperative to give it meaning. Back in the days when the cathedrals were being built, most of the builders were no longer around to see their completion, but they all knew that their work had meaning and would be meaningful for future generations. We find this meaning by sharing common values, but also by being passionate about what we do and by encouraging the best talent to join us. To make new generations want to work for a company, it must be meaningful, and that means having social values, which explains Econocom’s resolute commitment to CSR dating back 48 years.

What message or advice would you give to young people wishing to start a business?
J-L. B.: Don’t hesitate to take the plunge if you want to! The time is right because the risk is low. Entrepreneurship is the noblest of adventures! I have founded or co-founded upwards of 20 companies, and each time I’ve experienced immense satisfaction. These companies’ greatest asset has been the capacity to work together around shared values and towards a common goal. So, I would advise people to go for it, and not to be afraid, because they are not risking much. They may experience failures along the way, just like I and many other entrepreneurs have done, but they will learn from their mistakes and should be able to bounce back stronger.

“France has every chance of counting if it becomes more European.”

What strong measures do you expect from presidential candidates in favour of our companies and the French economy?
J-L. B.: If I had to choose just one, it would be to put an expiry date on all laws. Entrepreneurs invariably take a negative view of the jumble of laws we are constantly confronted with today, with new standards and new laws being piled on top of existing ones. Each new law should de facto abolish any previous ones and should be given a lifespan of three to five years, so that its impact can be assessed and it can be amended accordingly at the end of its trial period. The law on disability, which is already about 30 years old, offers a prime example. Despite being an excellent law, it is actually

quite dysfunctional and deserves to be reviewed. Moreover, if I could express one personal wish, I think it's a pity that trade union representation within companies is not stronger in our country. Every system needs checks and balances to function properly, and employees need strong representation. We need to reinvent the intermediate bodies in our country, because they are endangered and that is a great pity for our society as a whole.

Do you that think France can regain its leadership?
J-L. B.: I wish I knew! What I do know is that we at Econocom are endeavouring to be the best in our sector. More generally, I firmly believe that France has every chance of counting if it becomes more European. Our European neighbours are helping us enormously. Together, we have a real role to play in this age of globalisation.

How do you see *Econocom* in 10 years?
J-L. B.: I'd like to see us continuing to do our business well and targeting revenue of €10 billion. But our number one ambition is to become a major European group, a paradigm in terms of CSR and an international benchmark in the circular economy, so that all our employees can be proud to be part of the great Econocom family.

Interview by Valérie Loctin.

4 key figures

- 18 countries
- 9,200 employees
- €2.6 billion revenue
- 48 years' experience

Jean-Louis Bouchard is a graduate of the Ponts & Chaussées and Ecole Nationale du Génie Maritime engineering schools. He began his career with IBM in 1966. In 1973, he founded Europe Computer Systems (ECS), then Econocom in 1982, which subsequently became a leading European digital services and transformation group after the acquisition of Osiatis in 2013. He is still CEO today, at 79. He is one of the top 500 high net worth individuals in France.