



thyssenkrupp

Insights _ Polysius



Let's talk:

Francois Olivier: "It's breathtaking to feel a plant coming to life!"

In the last few years, Francois Olivier has spent a lot of time on major construction sites. Before that, he worked as a sales engineer and purchasing manager on construction sites for liquefied gas storage facilities and truck loading facilities for the oil and gas industry. In 2017, the mechanical engineer changed his job in order to work as a project manager for cement plant engineering and construction at thyssenkrupp

Industrial Solutions (France). For his current job, it is very useful that he is familiar with a different work perspective regarding plant engineering and construction. During the INSIGHTS interview, Francois Olivier talked about the challenges in his line of work, about events of which he still has vivid memories, and why he dreams of a construction project on the Pacific coast.

Monsieur Olivier, you work in France, but you are also often posted to plant sites all over the world. Where are you currently?

At the moment, I'm in Cameroon, where thyssenkrupp is constructing a large production line for calcined clay as well as a cement grinding plant by order of the Dutch company Cimpor Global Holdings. This plant is equipped with state-of-the-art technology and will contribute to reducing CO₂ emissions by 120,000 tonnes per year.

Let's assume you were at home in France. What's a typical working day like for you there?

I start my days with my children, three boys aged between two and nine. I can't remember what it feels like to lie quietly on the couch. When I'm at home, I take my older sons to school and then the youngest by bicycle to his nanny.

In January 2021, tkIS (France) was relocated to Les Pennes Mirabeau, which is quite close to my flat. That's very convenient as I can now cycle to work. After arriving at the office, I usually have coffee with my colleagues and check my e-mails before starting the "hard work". Well, actually my work isn't that hard as roughly 90% of the working time of a project manager is spent on direct communication, meetings, phone or video calls, e-mails and so on.

My main tasks depend on the project phase. At the beginning of a project, for instance, during the initiation phase or the planning phase, I spend most of the time developing a vision, defining a project strategy and putting together the core team, and suchlike.

However, when the erection of a plant is close to completion, I work on the plant site itself, where I'm mostly busy supporting the site teams and facilitating quick decisions. Finally, each project must be concluded within the prescribed period and on budget, the quality of the results must be warranted and the safety instructions must be observed. It is necessary to coordinate different people and various activities without losing sight of the stated objectives. During this phase, agility is a must. And that's exactly what I like about my job, because the work and the management of personnel are never the same.

“Agility is a must. And that's exactly what I like about my job, because the work and the management of personnel are never the same.”

Francois Olivier, Project Manager

You've said that you enjoy working with people. Are there other qualities that are essential for this type of job? Is it a problem for you to be away from home for a lengthy period?

First of all, I should clarify that although I spend a lot of time on site, particularly in the construction phase and during commissioning, I've never been away from home for more than six weeks in a row. Some colleagues work two whole years on a construction site. That's quite another challenge.

What is special regarding the work of a project manager on a plant site is that after having worked for months on a project, you can actually "touch" it on site. At the beginning, it's just a concept or 3D views, but when you see a building or a plant rising from the ground, and when you watch the devices running and "feel" the entire plant coming to life, it is truly breathtaking. Such emotions can only be experienced on site.

Of course, it isn't always easy. Working on the plant site also means being far from home, having to overcome major differences in time zones between the locations involved and answering the customer's questions every day. Internet access doesn't always work properly, and then there are issues such as dust, heavy rainfall and difficult climatic conditions. In addition, you have to deal with all sorts of problems concerning the project, such as delays and quality problems, and the like.

All this makes work on site fascinating, but not easy. A project manager has to be honest and determined and must know his or her job in order to preserve credibility with the customer and the sometimes difficult characters on the plant site.

And then, there's the distance to my family. Of course, it's never easy to be far from home, and my loved ones also miss me. So here, too, communication and honesty are the key factors. I'm glad that today's means of communication, especially "WhatsApp" video calls, make it possible for me to see my family.

Has there been one particular event on a plant site that sticks in your mind?

First of all, I recall a real "up-and-down" experience: it was around midnight on a Sunday at the beginning of October 2021. We'd been working many hours on site and were absolutely excited about having produced the first clinker in a plant located in Morocco. At last! After four years of hard work without incident, we finally produced clinker. Rarely had I been so proud of the team and its performance. Despite all the difficulties in the preceding three years, we did it! It was like the birth of a child.

However, after less than an hour of operation, some red spots appeared on the kiln shell. That was a real nightmare! We had to stop feeding the kiln and had to cool down the entire plant. None of the experts present on site knew exactly what had happened. Some weeks later, we succeeded in recommissioning the kiln after having made a few technical adjustments. We carried out the production test runs successfully, and the plant ran stably above the nominal capacity – in the end, it was a great success.

When you're in a tight-knit environment with your team on such a plant site, strong bonds are formed. Special moments, such as sharing cold sandwiches while waiting near the raw mill for the plant to restart, or spending hours and hours in the control room while checking diagrams and keeping fingers crossed, or the night when we removed the coal that had jammed below a hopper, will stick in your memory.

A few weeks after the industrial production test runs had been certified by the customer, I organised a kind of celebratory dinner for the whole team. It was a wonderful occasion to share memories and relax together.

As if there hadn't been enough challenges already, work was also affected by COVID-19.

Yes, that's right. As I've said before, about 90% of a project manager's job consists of communication. The closing of entire plant sites and national borders affected our work significantly. In 2020, the plant site in Morocco was locked down for almost six months. We sent all our foreign staff members home, and the whole world shut down. As a result, progress on the plant site stopped completely. It required a lot of time and energy to resume activities after that. Although the national borders were closed again for some months, we succeeded in completing assembly and commissioning the production line.

Like many other companies all over the world, we found remote work very helpful. The cooperation with our own team and the customer's personnel across a large distance changed the way of working. Personally, I believe that we're all able to adjust and that in the end, it all worked out.

Everywhere in the world, people have suffered due to COVID-19 and experienced dramatic losses. From this point of view, it isn't that bad to work from home and not to be able to travel abroad.

Last but not least, can you give us a brief glimpse of the private life of Francois Olivier?

Certainly! I'm 39 years old and was born in the south of France, in a town not far from Marseilles, where I spent a wonderful happy childhood. When I graduated as an engineer after five years of studying in Lyon, I stayed on for some years and also found my first job there. However, I missed the sun and the "southern way of life", so I finally went back to the Marseilles area, where I still live now.

I like playing guitar and – whenever I've got time – doing sport. My favourite hobby is bodyboarding. A bodyboard is a shorter version of a surfboard; unlike a surfer, you basically ride a bodyboard lying down on it. If thyssenkrupp were awarded a project on the Pacific coast, no matter where, I'd love to be the project manager there!





Francois Olivier with the construction team in Cameroon.