

PIERRE NELIS: FACILITATOR¹

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Abstract

Pierre Nelis left a secure management position to join a newly created firm that increased in size from 14 to 400 employees within two years. Over time, he became a facilitator; in other words, the right-hand man who implemented the entrepreneur's vision. When Microsoft bought the firm, Pierre Nelis was the person appointed to supervise the transition to the Bill Gates way of management. He subsequently decided to become an entrepreneur himself, but soon realized this was not his best role; his strength was as a facilitator. He went on to become a mentor for young entrepreneurs.

The case is used in an M.B.A. entrepreneurship program to introduce students through group discussions to the world of entrepreneurship, to open their eyes and to dispel myths. Some students are confirmed in their entrepreneurial feeling; others find out that they don't have what it takes to be an entrepreneur.

KEY WORDS: Managing companies, facilitator, management skills, creativity

INTRODUCTION

"I was fed up and frustrated with managing routine tasks. I wanted to build something. Softimage was a winner, a start-up that would grow. I'm not a visionary, I'm a tactician, and I needed a visionary to work with. Once the vision is there, I can be creative and make sure it's achieved. If someone tells me they want to climb a mountain, I'll find four or five ways for them to do so. They have to tell me where they want to go – I simply point the way."
– Pierre Nelis, 2004²

With family roots across three continents and a varied career path, Pierre Nelis has traveled many different roads, "working with some great entrepreneurs and getting to know many others along the way."

His journey began in the early 1950s in Lokandu, a town in the Congo, under Belgian rule at the time. Shortly after his birth, political unrest forced the Nelis family to flee back to their native Belgium. They subsequently moved to North America, where they settled in the early 1960s.

Pierre Nelis has only vague memories of the family's hasty departure from the Congo and the years he spent at a Belgian boarding school before the family packed their bags once again, this time moving to Quebec, where Pierre's father Marc-Michel, a pastor with the United Church, had accepted an appointment as a teacher and chaplain at the Church's French Evangelical Institute in Montreal. Marc-Michel, his wife and their five children settled in eastern Montreal, in the area known as Pointe-aux-Trembles.

Pierre Nelis was raised in the Protestant faith, studying at the Institute where his father taught. At high school, his grades were modest; he was much more interested in the theatre and sport, at which he excelled. His older brother Luc introduced him to the Cadets.

Two years in the Canadian Armed Forces taught him discipline, organization and rigor. He also developed a certain level of versatility, which he was later able to perfect by working in a variety of very

different environments. He began his civilian career as an office manager for a credit company (Canadian Bonded Credit), and moved on to a similar position with a construction company (Groves Construction). He then became Operations Manager for an engineering consultancy firm (Beauchemin, Beaton, Lapointe), followed by an appointment as Recruitment and Training Manager for a pharmaceutical company (Bristol-Myers Squibb). Later, he was appointed Human Resources and Administration Manager for a multinational research center (Noranda Technology Centre).

In 1992 he met Daniel Langlois, an animation software writer, and together they embarked on an adventure in which the combined creativity of Langlois and the team management skills of Nelis would propel Softimage, the company created by Langlois, onto the world stage. Softimage quickly attracted the attention of the industry greats and was purchased by Microsoft for US\$130 million in 1994, in what would be the multinational's first major acquisition, before being resold four years later. Pierre Nelis was Softimage's Operations Vice-President from 1992 to 1998, and for the last two years of this period he was also Business Development Manager for Microsoft.

A CO-BUILDER

Pierre Nelis needs action. At Noranda, his last employer before the Softimage adventure, his early enthusiasm for the challenges of his job soon waned. Ever watchful, however, he quickly spotted Softimage, the company created by Daniel Langlois:

"I was a member of the Association of World Research Centre Managers and attended international conferences throughout the world. So I often came into contact with high-level gray matter! It was an enriching and eye-opening experience. However, the job [at the Noranda Group's R&D Centre] soon became routine. I could have stayed there until I died but the challenge had gone, so I had a serious talk with myself. 'What do you want to do? Who with? Where? What do you like, what are your strengths and weaknesses? Where might you be put to best use?' I looked everywhere. Then I heard of Daniel Langlois, who was something of a tear away in the high-tech field."

A quick look at Softimage confirmed that the company was growing quickly. Daniel Langlois needed someone like him "to organize it all; there were people, processes and a versatile, highly effective leader stuck in a disorganized environment".

Daniel Langlois began his career as a producer of short films for the National Film Board (NFB), and soon earned a reputation for his top-flight special animation effects. His first film, *Tony de Peltrie*, produced in 1985 for Expo 86, attracted audience attention as the first 3-D stereoscopic animation film and established his position in the industry.

Despite his NFB successes, Langlois wanted more. In 1986 he mortgaged his house and launched Softimage, where he was finally free to give full rein to his creativity by designing increasingly complex special effects applications. It was not long before he outgrew his basement office and moved, with his software designers, to an old building on Montreal's multicultural St. Laurent Street.

The Softimage product was truly revolutionary. It allowed film artists to design forms with two or three clicks of the mouse, instead of the twelve or so needed by Alias, its closest competitor. Suddenly, software was more than just a tool – it had become a partner in the design process. Its user friendliness meant that every artist could become a true designer, and the possibilities were immense.

However, before Pierre Nelis was able to meet with Daniel Langlois and offer his services, he had to climb over the "Great Wall of China" erected by a secretary and a vice-president as a protective measure for Langlois, who was overworked and bombarded by telephone calls.

ORGANIZATIONAL EFFICIENCY AT THE SERVICE OF CREATIVITY

Pierre Nelis eventually managed to bypass the wall, and his first meeting with Daniel Langlois lasted just over an hour. Although very different in terms of appearance – Pierre Nelis wore a "nice jacket" and tie, while Langlois was dressed in "a T-shirt and two mismatched training shoes, one orange and one green" – their contact was instantaneous and easy. "We just clicked," said Nelis:

"From my point of view, he was exactly what I was looking for: disorganized, a victim of his own growth, an award winner who didn't know how to organize what he had. He had about 20 employees, and the office was a boiling pot. I said to myself, it's now or never. I was happy in my marriage, but bored with my work. I'm very serious and structured at work, very intense, a bit like a Ferrari on a racetrack. There's

a time to kick back and a time to work. The bigger the challenge, the more intense I am. So I was perfect for the firm. From Daniel's point of view, I think he was attracted by my broad experience and the fact that I enjoyed my work so much."

Pierre Nelis joined Softimage shortly after that first interview, in 1992. Appointed Vice-President, Human Resources and Administration, he became the 19th employee in a firm that would have a workforce of 500 by the time he left in 1998. Used to operating in structured environments, he began by drawing up his own employment contract, which offered a basic salary along with several stock options. The contract was presented to Daniel Langlois by Julien Blanchard, Softimage's Vice-President for Finance. Langlois signed it.

Although his salary at Softimage was well below what he had earned at Noranda, Pierre Nelis did not care. He had never had a luxury lifestyle. "My car was paid for and I had no debts. I bought \$10 bottles of wine instead of \$20 bottles", he said. His wife Linda was also still employed in the Marketing Department of Beauchemin, Beaton and Lapointe; it was here that the two first met and started dating.

Pierre Nelis discovered that the total lack of structure was not without its problems for Softimage, as sales began to increase both locally and internationally. One of his early tasks was to draw up employment contracts for all the personnel, containing confidentiality and non-competition agreements. It was another "first" for the company.

The founding employees were somewhat put out, since they saw this as a profound change in the organizational culture. Although it was difficult for him, Pierre Nelis was patient:

"I had no problems with new employees – they signed the agreements right away. Softimage was the darling of the world animation industry and everyone was desperate to work there. But it took me two years to get the early employees to sign."

Employment contracts meant recruitment. As the company had no recruitment policy, Pierre Nelis instituted a rigorous recruitment process designed to identify the best software developers. In 1992, Softimage was growing rapidly, hence the need for new R&D people. In those early days, three people, namely Daniel Langlois, Claude Cajolet (Vice-President, R&D) and Pierre Nelis, were responsible for determining the basic requirements for all positions advertised in the newspapers.

Pierre Nelis would select between five and ten potential candidates from the applications received, and then refer the best three to Claude Cajolet, who interviewed them along with three or four other people from his team. Each interviewer submitted an assessment report, but regardless of the team's recommendation, the final decision was entirely his, and everyone else simply had to live with it. This meant that every new candidate had seen about ten people before being offered a position at Softimage.

The vacation policy was another innovation introduced by Pierre Nelis:

"I introduced a policy of one month's vacation for Vice-Presidents and three weeks for employees. In reality, though, everyone worked all the time. We took a bit of extra time if we'd been working non-stop for five or six days in Las Vegas or Amsterdam, for example. But we didn't watch the clock. I was always available by phone, even on Christmas Day and New Year's Day. Softimage was making a lot of money and playing in the major leagues. When you're being paid the amount we were earning, you don't tell your boss you won't be answering the phone one day."

Nineteen ninety-two was a very busy year. In addition to recruiting 80 new employees, Pierre Nelis traveled extensively. Among other things, he opened new offices in Paris and Singapore. Why there? Because the animation market is concentrated in three principal regions, all of which are worth about the same in terms of sales volume:

- "One-third of our sales were made in Pacific Asia, with Japan and South Korea being the leading markets;
- Another third of our sales were in the United States: to production houses in Texas, the Boston region and California
- The other third were scattered throughout the world."

The choice of Singapore rather than Hong Kong was deliberate. For Pierre Nelis, the advantageous business environment in Singapore (infrastructure and telecommunications costs, an educated workforce, proximity to an airport) made the city a natural choice.

Pierre Nelis recruited and helped select hundreds of employees. The firm's fast growth generated a constant stream of new tasks in addition to the many for which he was already responsible, until in the end he was virtually living at the office. When not physically present, he was always available via the Internet:

“Somewhat naively, I always believed you could be successful in life just by being competent. I didn’t think you had to cultivate relationships with people inside and outside the company. The end justified the means. Like a hockey player who scores a lot of goals, but is hated by his teammates! I scored. Everything I touched turned to gold. It was wonderful. I was really focused on the task. For example, Julien Blanchard was a guy who tried to do everything, but when he ran into problems I took over his files. I’d say to Daniel Langlois, ‘Give me the construction file, I’ll manage it for you. Give me the accounting system computerization file and let Julien concentrate on the figures. He’s Finance Vice-President, he hasn’t the time for that.’ Everyone benefited.”

In 1993, Pierre Nelis oversaw four phases of a new construction project on the corner of Saint-Laurent Boulevard and Milton Street, extending the Softimage offices to accommodate its 500 employees. He computerized the accounting system; Softimage, a world leader in computer animation, had been using manual systems until then! He also set up a customer service department that was able to respond immediately to customer requests:

“Customer service is very important to a software company. An artist who buys the Softimage application has to meet production deadlines for films that might be in Hollywood or Japan, for example. He hasn’t the time to mess around. Customer service must be available 24 hours a day to solve problems, regardless of time differences.”

Pierre Nelis is a builder. Building is what he enjoys. When he has nothing to build, he finds his work boring. At Softimage, he did not have time to be bored – the responsibility and challenge were constant. “I’d found my niche,” he says. “I thoroughly enjoyed myself, even though I had to work hard.”

AN ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE MARKED BY INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

“Daniel was a great boss! He gave me operational goals and wanted to be kept in the loop, but otherwise he left me alone. Often he didn’t know how to achieve the goals himself. He didn’t care, he just wanted results. He wasn’t interested in operations.”

Who, then, was responsible for decisions such as opening up a new market or adding a new application? In most cases, a customer would express a specific need, and then all subsequent decisions were made by the Management Committee, composed of Daniel Langlois, Claude Cajolet (R & D), Dave McCray (Sales) and Pierre Nelis (Operations). The Committee met every week and set up the *modus operandi* to respond to the customer’s request.

In the case of adding elements to existing applications, Claude Cajolet would look at his team, and if he did not have the right person to develop the application, Pierre Nelis would recruit someone for him. After the success of *Jurassic Park*, customers began to be more demanding. As Pierre Nelis pointed out:

“It wasn’t me who would decide to open new markets or add features to our software. The customers would talk to Daniel first – for example, ‘Look, we won Oscars for the *Jurassic Park* dinosaurs. Now we want to create realistic human beings, but your software doesn’t understand hair, or the hair it produces isn’t realistic.’ So it would all start with a need expressed by a customer.”

On the other hand, when the Committee was looking for a new market, Pierre Nelis would call on his marketing team, asking them to compare the different markets and their specifications. Every decision was made jointly:

“The ideas weren’t mine. I was more of a... facilitator, if you will, a kind of semi-entrepreneur who worked to maintain the super-entrepreneur’s greatness. Tell me what you want and leave it to me! I’m the one who’ll wake up at night, thinking about what to do. And (Daniel) quickly realized that I delivered the goods. I was always ahead of deadlines. I always got organized. I brought structure. The ‘open up a market then hire a manager’ philosophy makes me laugh. My philosophy is ‘hire the right people then get them to establish and apply a strategy.’ If you have the right pilots, they’ll learn to fly whatever plane you give them.”

Pierre Nelis is an excellent conceiver and producer of complementary visions, and during his time at Softimage he became a vital element in the realization of his employer’s overall vision. The relationship between Daniel Langlois and his right-hand man was remarkably close, but always remained essentially a working relationship. When it came to organizing the company, the chemistry between the two men was strong – they understood one another quickly and completely. On the other hand, in their personal lives, outside the company, there was virtually no chemistry. Pierre Nelis remembers some delicate occasions:

"I worked with him for five years. Our offices were separated by his secretary's office. Curiously, we never had any philosophical debates. Although we built an extraordinary world-class company that we ultimately sold to Microsoft, we were never 'friends.' I was his *doer*. We didn't spend time together outside the office. I only had dinner with him once, in Paris, with my wife, although I did eat more often with his wife, who was Vice-President of Visual Research. When they split up, I had to manage the situation for them."

WHAT ABOUT THE FAMILY?

In 1994, the Nelis family landscape changed with the birth of his daughter. For Daniel Langlois, whose baby was Softimage, it was almost a betrayal:

"Daniel thought Claude and I would abandon the company³. We changed our working hours. We might have been less present in the workplace, but we still worked far more than average, from home when necessary. For example, we'd organize a videoconference rather than a trip to California. The arrival of e-mail certainly helped us. I had dinner at home more often. Linda quit her job to look after our daughter. The two of them traveled with me all over the world. While I worked, they'd visit whatever city we were in. It was a good arrangement all around."

The year 1994 also saw another major event, the sale of Softimage to Microsoft for US\$130 million. The sale brought a new three-year contract for Pierre Nelis. It was an important commitment for him; if he left the firm before the end of the three-year period, he would lose all his stock options. And that meant losing certain wealth; every Softimage share entitled him to 0.458 of a Microsoft share, and Microsoft's shares were divided ten times between 1994 and 1998. "I was motivated more by the idea of building a company and learning, than by money," he says – although he was careful not to neglect his financial interests.

AT THE MICROSOFT SCHOOL...

Moshe Litchman, Microsoft's Joint President, was sent to Montreal to head Softimage. Litchman, a software engineer who graduated from MIT, did his military service in Israel and piloted F4 fighter planes. A disciplined individual, he was one of the 20 most important people in Microsoft's succession planning pipeline.

Moshe Litchman became Pierre Nelis' mentor:

"He taught me about Microsoft's culture, philosophy and know-how, including its rigor and discipline in the production and delivery of products and the entire marketing machine. In the past, we'd delivered our products in typically Quebec style, based on what I like to call the *pleasure cruise* philosophy. At Microsoft's Seattle office they gave me the firm's one-month intensive *Business Warfare* course. It was an extraordinary brainwashing experience!"

As the Softimage officer responsible for the merger, Pierre Nelis became joint manager of the newly merged company, along with Microsoft's Susan Voeller. Although Softimage was owned by Microsoft, it remained 100% Canadian. From 1996 onwards, Pierre Nelis wore two hats:

- He was Business Unit Vice-President, responsible for public and governmental affairs at Softimage. His job involved managing the firm's technological infrastructure, and meant that he could abandon his previous duties relating to finance, operations and customer service, which had become routine and lacking in challenge for him.

- Now a Microsoft employee, he also oversaw an Internet company project known as *Microsoft Sidewalk*, an Internet equivalent of the *Voir* publication (a free newspaper aimed at a young audience and covering a wide variety of subjects). *Microsoft Sidewalk* was an element of Microsoft's business plan for the creation of virtual companies in different cities – Paris, London, Moscow, New York and Montreal – to establish trends throughout the world. However, the Montreal component had lagged far behind the other four.

As the person responsible for the *Microsoft Sidewalk* website, Pierre Nelis recruited 20 people, designers and journalists, from the Montreal region. The site's editorial content was aimed at the 18-35 age group and included restaurant reviews as well as various "Lifestyle" columns. However, the venture proved unprofitable due to poor web penetration, and Microsoft sold the entire operation, including the Montreal component, to Ticketmaster, its principal competitor.

In an attempt to keep Pierre Nelis on the payroll, Microsoft offered him the position of general manager at its Seattle, Washington or Singapore office (his choice). All three cities were important centers for the company:

“After visiting Singapore with Linda and my daughter, I turned them down. My wife is an athlete – she competed in pre-Olympic races and still runs every day. In Quebec, you can run anywhere. In Singapore, you have to run on a track out in the suburbs, about ten miles from where we would have been living. I also wanted another child and a calmer lifestyle that would allow me to get back into shape. My three-year contract was over, and I was free to do what I wanted. In 1998, I decided to leave Microsoft to become a coach or mentor for other entrepreneurs. I decided I’d rather choose my projects and stay here, in Montreal.”

And so an important chapter in Pierre Nelis’ life came to a close. At this point, it is interesting to look back at the paths that led him to his decision.

ACROSS CONTINENTS AND CULTURES

Both the Nelis and Baude families were from Brussels. Their world turned upside down in May 1940 when the Belgian government capitulated to Germany and the country was occupied by the German armed forces. Léon Baude, Pierre Nelis’ maternal grandfather, was a government tax inspector. Pierre Nelis, who was very young at the time, has only vague memories of him. Baude survived the war and died in the late 1960s.

Of his paternal grandparents he has no memories at all. They were imprisoned by the Germans and sent to a concentration camp in Germany, where they were executed. It was virtually a miracle that their son, Marc-Michel, survived. Pierre Nelis describes his father’s extraordinary odyssey:

“In 1943 my father escaped from a German camp by hiding in a garbage can, and crossed half of Germany to get back to Belgium! My mother’s parents hid him in their loft. My mother would take him food, and they fell in love.”

After the war, life returned more or less to normal in the Belgian capital of Brussels. Louise Baude went to school and qualified as a nurse, while Marc-Michel Nelis opted to study psychology, theology and chemistry. They married and moved to the Congo, which was still a Belgian colony in the 1950s.

Pierre Nelis has no doubt that his father’s decision to become a missionary and chaplain in Africa was triggered by the death of his parents. For the next twelve years, Marc-Michel and Louise Nelis traveled around the Congo, living in villages, building schools and churches, and teaching the Protestant faith.

In the early 1960s, however, war once again touched the lives of the Nelis family. This time it was the bloody civil war that raged through the Congo. Having lost everything, they fled back to Brussels, Louise and the children first, and Marc-Michel later. While waiting for her husband to return, Louise sent her four children – Pierre, his two older brothers and his sister – to boarding school.

PEACE IN QUÉBEC?

About this time, the province of Quebec was recruiting French-speaking teachers in Europe to make up for its shortage of home-trained teachers. Marc-Michel Nelis accepted a position as teacher and chaplain at the United Church’s French Evangelical Institute, and the family moved to Pointe-aux-Trembles, an eastern suburb of Montreal, to a house owned by the Institute⁴.

The United Church is a Protestant church that is similar in many respects to the Catholic Church. Its members believe in the same God and the same values, but without the adoration of the saints, and also without confession and communion. The biggest difference between the two lies in the status of the chaplains, who are permitted to marry.

However, there are also some smaller differences. For example, confirmation exists but is not as structured as in the Catholic Church, and mass is not compulsory. On the other hand, the Nelis children went regularly to Sunday School and were taught religion by their father. Pierre Nelis looks back on the experience:

“My memories of the Church aren’t bad at all. I followed my brothers, and was a member of the Saint-Luc church youth group on Papineau Street. I also joined the Protestant Scouts. There were fairly active pockets of Protestants everywhere, mostly cultivated people, many of them immigrant graduates.”

The family settled into its new home. Marc-Michel Nelis worked hard, while his wife stayed home to look after the children:

“Versatility is one of my characteristics. I’ve always been very versatile. When I was small, my mother taught me to sew and knit. By the time I was 7 or 8 years old I could sew on a button, and I could knit quite well by the time I was 11 or 12. I enjoyed it. I cooked, I sang in a choir and I played sport – badminton, soccer, baseball, wrestling, weightlifting and fitness training. I was a judo brown belt for two or three years. I never played hockey, but I did take part in local dance competitions with my girlfriend – cha-cha, rumba, triple swing, that kind of thing, and I did line dancing. It was fun! I wasn’t the best dancer in the world, but I was pretty good.”

Pierre Nelis enjoyed many activities that were not typical for children of his age, and was heavily involved in both team and individual sports:

“Wrestling and judo are individual sports, but you’re also part of a team in which respect and discipline are important. You have to follow a certain process and respect a certain code of ethics, especially in judo.”

In addition to sports and their schoolwork, the Nelis children enjoyed playing outside, and during the summer vacation they went to summer camp to learn English. Pierre Nelis has this to say about this part of his life:

“My grade cards show that I was in 2nd grade by age five. I suspect my mother wanted to get rid of me because I was such an active kid, but I’d been well taught by my older brothers. I enjoyed this time of my life. We played and had a lot of fun in the fields behind Notre-Dame Street. I played outside with the kids from the Institute. When we moved house (to Ecores Street near Jean-Talon), I played with the neighborhood kids and I was always the gang leader, regardless of nationality.”

Pierre Nelis went to elementary school at the Institute, a mixed institution governed by the Protestant School Board. It was fairly large, with between 500 and 600 pupils, mostly immigrants from France and Belgium, along with a handful of Québec-born children. The French-speaking section of the Protestant School Board governed all the schools attended by Pierre Nelis.

Even at this early stage of his life, Pierre Nelis was attracted to the Army cadets. Although this was a typically Quebec group, he had no problems joining. His brothers did not enjoy the cadets; Pierre, however, loved it:

“We went twice during the week, on Saturdays, to band practice and also to summer camp. I started out as a mascot during the week, when I was 9 years old. I couldn’t officially go to summer camp because I was too young. However, from the time I was 13, I spent all my summers at the Valcartier summer camp, and also at the English language camps in Alberta. Later, I became an air cadet because I found the army cadets a bit “off the wall”. Some of them actually thought they’d be learning to kill people! It wasn’t about that. The Army is like the Scouts, a kind of mini-world for teenagers, with courses on leadership, English (in Alberta), public speaking, table manners and behavior training.”

Pierre Nelis was an average student and completed his secondary education at the Roberval School⁵. He did not enjoy school and did not work hard. On the other hand, he loved public speaking and theatre, and also played individual sports (team sports were not popular in Quebec’s schools in the 1970s). And, of course, he had the cadets. He really looked forward to his evenings.

Although Pierre Nelis is proud of his father’s intelligence and intellectual abilities, it was his older brother, Luc, who became his model. At school, he also admired two of his teachers, Mr. Masinon, who taught history, and Ms. Quatout, who taught French. He did not enjoy dictation or spelling, but loved to write stories. And yet he was able to learn from these two teachers, whom he respected for their knowledge and structure. Although he was a highly rational boy who considered the future to be more important than the present, Pierre Nelis was fascinated by history. Now, some 30 years later, he notes that he still “reads the world news, every day.”

Although comfortable speaking to groups or acting on a stage, Pierre Nelis never considered a career as a teacher or actor, because “as far as I’m concerned, high school teachers only keep order in the classroom and teach a single subject. I never thought much about what I was going to do, and I never went through any major identity crisis – at least, not until I was 40 years old!”

LEARNING AND DISCIPLINE MARKED BY THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES

When he finished high school Pierre Nelis was still too young to join the army; the minimum recruitment age was 16, and at 15 he still had a few months to wait. However, he was determined to become a soldier and trained hard during the wait, since he knew the importance of being physically fit.

With his high school diploma, Pierre Nelis was accepted into the army in the rank of Second Lieutenant; if he had had a bachelor's degree, or studied at the Military College in Saint-Jean or Kingston, he would have been a Lieutenant. Even without a degree, however, he still had an opportunity to become a Lieutenant; all he had to do was to take a basic three-month officer training course.

He received the required training at the Chiliwack Officers' School, located north-east of Vancouver "in a beautiful region of British Columbia, not unlike Mont-Tremblant to the north of Montreal." He was one of 32 students in the School's single French-speaking platoon; there were six English-speaking platoons. He describes the ambiance as follows:

"The French-speaking platoon lost eight students after three months. I ranked second in my class. I was in my element! I loved the intensive pace of the officers' training. You had to pass the basic course to be able to move on to specialty training (aviation, marine or infantry)."

He took the *Aviation 1* course, which he enjoyed because he was alone in a small aircraft. However, he never considered going on to take *Aviation 2*; to do this, he would have had to sign a five-year contract and pay back the \$125,000 course fee if he dropped out.

Instead, he chose the infantry because he did not have to sign a contract (the Armed Forces did not invest much energy in the infantry sector). This involved leaving Chiliwack and moving thousands of kilometers "to the Army's largest base at the time, about as far east as you can go in Canada, in Gagetown, New Brunswick."

In the infantry, Pierre Nelis found the group dynamic to be far different from the one he had known in the aviation group. He enjoyed it, because it was reminiscent of his time in the cadets and at officer training school. He also discovered another aspect of his personality:

"In the army, I was a real live wire. To my surprise, I got very high scores in both my peer evaluations and in the psychological tests my father made me take. My Lieutenant couldn't get over it. When it was time for discipline, I could be disciplined, but when it was the time to let go, I was the life and soul of the party. When we had to walk for three days without sleeping, I was the one who would motivate the others. People regarded me as a natural leader."

Training in the army takes place in "blocks", and between each block the recruits simply have to wait. They might be loaned to a battalion, asked to do secretarial work, or just left to their own devices. Waiting for his assignment to Portage LaPrairie in Manitoba, Pierre Nelis felt the pace slowing. He lost his enthusiasm and decided to leave the army, obtaining a diploma and honorable discharge in 1976. He had been a soldier for two years, and during that time had discovered his leadership abilities, as well as the fact that he functioned better as part of a team than alone, and the fact that he was flexible, persistent and able to accomplish great things.

LEARNING TO MANAGE

Pierre Nelis came back to Montreal with his Army diploma in hand, and moved in with his parents. In the 1970s, employers were keen to hire former Army recruits, but before joining the labor force Pierre Nelis decided to "try my hand at education." He quickly came to the conclusion that studying was not for him⁶. However, his experience with summer employment made him realize that he needed a more stable and better-paid job:

"I learned from the newspaper that Canadian Bonded Credit was looking for someone who was bilingual, with good organizational skills and discipline, but not necessarily with experience. I went for an interview and we "clicked". So they hired me."

AT THE BOTTOM OF THE LADDER

Canadian Bonded Credit (CBC), whose offices were located in the Saint-Léonard neighborhood of Montreal, was a commercial debt recovery company and also offered high-risk financing to clients who

were unable to obtain bank loans. Because of the risk, interest rates were high and endorsements were required.

Pierre Nelis started out as a clerk, and went on to work at virtually every level of the company, gaining experience with everything from para-legal work to court cases and accounting. He also worked one or two evenings a week with lawyer Sheldon Price at Place Ville-Marie, organizing his outstanding commercial accounts. He soon knew everything there was to know about bad debts:

“My starting salary was \$9,000 a year, but it had gone up to \$12,000 three years later. A five-figure salary was really great at the time. I was a very rigorous worker. The company was pan-Canadian and employed about fifty people in Montreal. I have no idea what its turnover was – I never even asked myself the question. You have to remember the context. I had zero knowledge of the business world and zero understanding of how a company operated. Today, the first thing I look at is the stock market value and the turnover.”

Half his work was in English and the other half in French. Most of his co-workers were French-speaking, as were two-thirds of the clients with whom he was in contact, but virtually all the company's documentation was in English. After five years at CBC, he felt it was time to move onwards and upwards:

“I don't really remember why I changed jobs. I'd done pretty much everything at CBC and perhaps I felt I was underpaid. I don't know. When you're in a two-bit high-school job, you're not really part of the bigger world. You only realize it when you come into contact with professionals your age who are working for large corporations earning \$20,000 or more. So you start asking yourself questions and looking around you. I don't mean to be disparaging when I say this, because my early jobs were a great learning experience for me.”

Other jobs, in which he learned a great deal, soon followed. Groves Construction, for example, was a general contractor working 90% of the time for the Grand Council of the Crees in the James Bay region of Canada. With its virtual monopoly over contracts with the Crees, Groves Construction employed between 20 and 500 people, depending on the season, and up to 700 in peak periods. Most of its employees worked in Canada's Great North.

Groves Construction's civil engineers built ice bridges so that 24-wheel trucks could carry all the materials required to build airports, villages and infrastructures on Cree territory. According to Pierre Nelis, his job was as follows:

“I negotiated with suppliers, recruited workers and took care of all the accounting for new projects. I bought equipment and monitored budgets. I was something of a jack-of-all-trades.”

Versatility was something Pierre Nelis had cultivated since his childhood, and he was able to change jobs easily because every new experience brought new challenges, new knowledge and new skills. Eventually, he answered an advertisement by Beauchemin, Beaton, Lapointe (BBL), Quebec's largest engineering consulting firm in the 1980s, specializing in environment, transportation and energy, and was hired as its Operations Manager. The head office, located on Peel Street in Montreal, employed around 200 people, including 180 engineers. Pierre Nelis describes his job:

“As Operations Manager, I was responsible for administrative support – in other words, everything that wasn't connected with engineering. I was the only one who didn't have an engineering degree, and something of a “poor relation” among the other managers. I reported to Serge Pilote, the Executive Vice-President.”

With his general managerial experience, Pierre Nelis had what he describes as a “sufficient and generalized knowledge” of accounting, but was not yet able to produce financial statements. He quickly learned all there was to know at BBL, which he regards as a “great” but short-lived experience.

MEETING WITH A HEADHUNTER

Although not “actively” looking for a new job, a headhunter nevertheless recruited Pierre Nelis. He describes his reaction:

“I was receptive, unlike other periods of my life when I refused proposals that came out of the blue ... I hadn't even submitted a résumé. I became Human Resources and Training Manager for Squibb Canada.”

At the time, Squibb Canada was a pharmaceutical company located in Montreal. It was one of the industry's major players, due to its research and products in the field of infectious diseases. His new appointment raised a few smiles among his acquaintances:

“Several people asked me how I’d managed to become a recruitment and training manager when all my experience was in general operations administration. They all thought I didn’t have the right experience – it was crazy! However, I just ‘clicked’ with the guy who hired me – Guy Darcy, the Human Resources and Administration Vice-President. In reality, he was looking for a generalist who he could train as a replacement for himself, since he was about to retire, but there wasn’t a suitable vacancy in the company.”

The new Human Resources and Training Manager was responsible for preparing job descriptions in collaboration with the division vice-presidents, and recruiting clinical research specialists throughout Canada and Europe. He also put together training courses for medical representatives, and technical courses for office staff. In 1989, Bristol Myers bought Squibb. During the transition, one of Pierre Nelis’ jobs was to analyze the jobs affected by the merger; some regions suddenly found themselves with two representatives, for example. He clashed with the Bristol Myers people, as the following anecdote shows:

“When Bristol Myers bought Squibb, the new Human Resources and Administration Vice-President organized a meeting the following June with the 18 employees from our department and our boss, Guy Darcy. He started telling us what we should be doing, and I stood up and said ‘Excuse me, but as long as Guy Darcy is my boss, I’ll be reporting to him!’ Ten or fifteen years ago I was still very impulsive. I wasn’t in awe of anyone, even the Prime Minister himself! I’ve always said what I thought. Today, though, I tend to say it differently.”

Two weeks later the entire department, including Guy Darcy, was laid off; Bristol Myers wanted to take over and “bring in its own people. Guy and I still talk about it! In any case, the experience brought me some maturity and allowed me to find another job that was twice as interesting, at least at first,” he says.

Noranda Technology was the Noranda Group’s research and development center. A huge laboratory, it was located in a warehouse complex containing small-scale reproductions of mines and mini oil refineries. Of the 250 or so people who worked there, approximately 200 were specialist researchers in the minerals, metals and energy sectors, who recreated experiments for implementation in the Group’s companies.

The center was managed by an “extraordinary guy”, Frank Lederman, who was straight out of one of the best management schools in the world, General Electric. His mission was to put the center back on its feet. Pierre Nelis, again the only manager without a Ph.D., describes the center’s situation and goals:

“The goal was to bring the center back to world-class level. At the time, it was doing research for the sake of it, with no specific goal that could be measured in terms of quality or time, and no performance evaluation. We had to change the culture, eliminate the dead wood, set up a performance evaluation procedure, give training, modernize the computer infrastructure and implement a project management process.”

With Guy Darcy, who became a friend over the years, and Frank Lederman, who raised him to a new level, Pierre Nelis came face-to-face for the first time with sophisticated management concepts and their applications. And yet, his early enthusiasm was soon tempered by routine. It was at this point that Pierre Nelis experienced his first major identity crisis, the one that led him to the Softimage adventure.

LIFE AFTER SOFTIMAGE

“There were a number of factors that persuaded me to take a sabbatical. First, I’d almost got divorced three or four times during my time at Softimage. Second, my health had suffered. I had high blood pressure and chronic sinusitis, probably due to stress among other things, and was taking Cortisone. And third, in Montreal I was a big fish in a small pond, whereas at Microsoft I’d been a small fish in a big pond. Even in the best case scenario, I’d only ever have been a vice-president somewhere in the Microsoft empire.”

And so began a sabbatical that was supposed to help him get his strength back and perhaps lose some of the ten or so kilos that he had gained in the last two years. In the end it lasted for only a summer, which he spent traveling around Europe with his family, purely for enjoyment. Like an athlete after a competition or a performer after a show, he was both physically and mentally exhausted:

“A kind of *down* that lasts at least a year, even if you’re emotionally solid. I was still in operational mode, on a high, but I had nothing to do. I couldn’t score any more. The telephone wasn’t ringing. It was hard for me. Everyone who left went through something similar. Fortunately, things got better over time. Your pace of life and priorities change. You find other things.”

In the end, after stepping away from the Softimage/Microsoft tornado, Pierre Nelis never really carried out his plan to take a year off because he was approached immediately upon returning to Montreal from his trip to Europe. Thanks to his experience, however, he was able to select the people and projects that most interested him, leaving aside anyone and anything he did not feel was "authentic". In the space of a few months, he rationalized the Canadian operations of Bell Canada's Sympatico division. And then Richard Szalwinsky, Softimage's former Sales Vice-President, contacted him.

After leaving Softimage, Richard Szalwinsky went on to found Discreet Logic, a computer products company that designed "non-linear digital systems and multi-platform software used to create and compose images, sets and special effects for the movie, video and television markets." In the space of a few years it became a world leader in its field, and in 1999 was sold to Autodesk.

With the proceeds of the sale, Richard Szalwinsky decided to buy a movie production company (Malofilm), a clothing company on Montreal's Saint-Laurent Street (Rugby North America) and a fringe magazine (Vice). Bringing the three entities together under the *Behavior* banner, his intention was to create a platform including editorial content and a website, aimed directly at the 18-35 age group.

Pierre Nelis played a similar role for Richard Szalwinsky as he had played for Daniel Langlois at Softimage, becoming his "right-hand man" and facilitator. For the next year and a half, at the dawn of the 21st century, Pierre Nelis oversaw the project from his new Multimedia City office, managing operations while Richard Szalwinsky took care of financial aspects. However, the project failed and the *Behavior* banner disappeared in 2000. Richard Szalwinsky kept parts of the firm and sold Behavior Films to Michael Jackson. Pierre Nelis has this to say about his time with Behavior:

"Richard was hyperactive and came up with ideas you didn't expect. I worked well with him when it was a question of implementing his projects and turning his creativity into performance. On the other hand, things didn't go so well when he tried to oversee all the little details of what we were doing. If I'd stayed in the medium or longer term, I'd have crashed. I really didn't want to stay on in the long term. I wanted to try other things. I had a bit of money, and that gave me the freedom to test the waters and experiment. I wanted to take a year off and travel. I wanted another baby and to spend more time with my family. I did get to look after the kids, but I wasn't really able to travel. I just seemed to get drawn into projects."

Even so, he was able to take control of his life and manage his schedule, forcing himself to work no more than 40 hours a week. His health improved, his chronic sinusitis disappeared and he was able to come off the Cortisone. More importantly, he spent a lot of time with his family – breakfasts together in the morning, homework after school with the oldest girl, and lots of cycling.

These days, regardless of the weather, Pierre Nelis maintains a regime of between three and five hours of exercise per week, to get back into his pre-Softimage shape – cardiovascular exercises, jogging, stationary bike and treadmill exercises, and in winter, cross-country and downhill skiing. He no longer travels extensively, takes more time for himself, is careful with his environment – he does not smoke – and has begun eating better, realizing that "the people who perform the best are healthy and eat well". Fruit, vegetables, dairy products, whole grain cereals and protein have become part of the Nelis family's menu. In summer, "I try to take things easy, at least a month of vacation and 12 or 13 days off every year," he says. And he gives the same advice to the entrepreneurs he meets:

"If you work intensively, you need a month off plus 13 long weekends every year. To restore a balance, I advise small business executives to compromise, even if they don't take vacation, they can still have long weekends, family dinners or lunches, and relaxation time. If you work all the time, you become dysfunctional. I really don't approve of the American system, which forces women to return to work two weeks after giving birth. High-level American companies usually offer only two weeks of vacation, increasing to three weeks after five years. It's just not enough."

GIVING BACK TO SOCIETY

Pierre Nelis believes society has given him a great deal, and now tries to give something back through community work and volunteer work. Since 2000, he has been a coach and mentor for the Ahuntsic-Cartierville Local Economic and Community Development Centre (known by its French acronym CLD) in Montreal, a government agency that helps venture creators in a variety of ways. He enjoys this type of volunteer work, since he feels he is contributing to the creation and development of firms that will, in turn, help invigorate their environment.

Occasionally, Laurent Simon, a Professor of Management at HEC Montreal, refers entrepreneurs who need a helping hand. Sometimes, too, people call him because they have heard of him through the SPINC⁷, where he is a member of the board of directors. The SPINC, created with the financial support of Canada Economic Development, is a collaborative initiative involving various private and institutional partners.

Pierre Nelis volunteers mostly in the digital technology sector, sitting on several start-up boards of directors. In some cases he is also a business advisor, helping the firms to negotiate contracts with large firms. On the other hand, when he sits on the boards of established firms, he asks for payment.

Of his 40-hour working week, half is spent on volunteer activities, including mentoring (80%) and board membership (20%). The other half is spent on remunerated activities, usually commissioned by boards of directors or investors. These commissions are extremely varied, lasting from a week to several months, and including tasks such as problem solving and managerial or directorial transitions.

MANAGER? STRATEGIST? TACTICIAN? ENTREPRENEUR? SEMI-ENTREPRENEUR? FACILITATOR? WHICH TERM BEST DESCRIBES THE ROLE PLAYED BY PIERRE NELIS?

Pierre Nelis has often wondered about what he is, what he does, his strengths and weaknesses, and his future potential. He also wonders about what he is able to do, achieve, undertake and complete successfully. Is he a manager – an experienced, top-flight manager? Or is he an entrepreneur? Or someone who smoothes the way for entrepreneurs?

“I’m totally incapable of creating something out of nothing. An idea! Eureka! Honestly, the apple-on-the-head thing just isn’t me. I don’t know how to do that, and I don’t want to know. I don’t even want to try because I know I’d fail. I only go to war when I know I can win!”

Pierre Nelis is quick to acknowledge that, if his life had unfolded differently, he may have become a tradesperson like his Audi dealer in Laval. He even considered opening a restaurant franchise. “I soon abandoned the idea of the restaurant franchise. I’ve loved cars ever since I was a child, but with a dealership I’d have been enthusiastic at first, and then I’d have become bored. What I actually wanted was to fulfill my potential,” he says, and he knew he could not do this by going into business for himself.

What, then, does he intend to do now, to make sure he continues to learn and grow? In spite of all his achievements, Pierre Nelis has never experienced the “Aha!” moment that would turn him into an entrepreneur. He hates the “blank sheet” concept and the thought of having to devise a project for himself. On the other hand, he likes the idea of joining an existing enterprise for four or five years, and working normally. He would like to commit himself to a new venture, especially as his youngest child will soon be starting school:

“I need a stroke of luck ... a meeting, a partner with a vision who needs help to articulate that vision. I need a challenge. In fact, I’m still looking for myself in many respects, and oddly enough, I’m frustrated.”

Pierre Nelis is a bit like a soldier who needs to go to war every now and then. He needs a cause to resume his disciplined lifestyle. He knows he is neither a manager nor an entrepreneur. He knows he needs action and can make things happen provided he is working with someone else, especially if that someone is a demanding entrepreneur. Although he defines himself as a semi-entrepreneur, many people describe him as a “facilitator, someone who can give, take and give again”.

SOME KEYS FOR SUCCESSFUL ENTREPRENEURIAL PROJECTS

Transparency, Rigour And Generosity

When he was younger, Pierre Nelis did not always place all his cards on the table, perhaps because he was not really aware of his strengths and weaknesses. More recently, however, he has begun “being straight with people”, so that the rules of the game are clear:

“If the entrepreneur, the partners or myself aren’t in good faith, we won’t be building on solid foundations and the whole thing could come crashing down around our ears one day. Because everyone has a fairly strong personality, we all need to work together in the right direction, with shared final goals.”

Pierre Nelis has always preferred teamwork to individual work, and has always instilled in his teammates the importance of setting goals, drawing up plans of action and being prepared to step away from the beaten path.

Despite this mindset, it is not always easy for him to work with an entrepreneur – for example, making an entrepreneur understand a different point of view at odds with his or her preconceived ideas can sometimes be a risky proposition. Pierre Nelis overcomes this by managing his working relationship and helping the entrepreneur to realize that a different viewpoint is not necessarily a contradiction, but more an attempt to see the problem logically and in its entirety, in the interests of the company.

Rigor is as important as transparency in any company. A certain amount of tact is needed to maintain a balance between an adventurous entrepreneur who does not like to be pressured and the other members of the team who can sometimes feel pressured by the entrepreneur's methods. Pierre Nelis has learned a great deal about human nature, organizational development, environmental complexity and competition within societies. He would like to be able to apply all this learning in environments that are somewhat more stable than those he has known so far. "Is there some way of living a normal life, one in which there's a balance between work and family, and yet still have a job that's stimulating and exciting? The answer is yes if you're an entrepreneur, but what do you do if you're not an entrepreneur? There must be something!"

Generous by nature ever since childhood, Pierre Nelis has identified a certain number of activities that interest and stimulate him, and is involved in several of them:

"Everyone works as part of a team and lives in a society. Once you've understood that and feel comfortable with it, it's easy to be generous. You have to be disciplined, of course. I've always given whenever I've had the time. I've been involved in all kinds of things – beauty products, fashion design, travel agencies. It's fascinating, you really learn a lot."

Versatility, Amenability And Learning

To realize a vision, entrepreneurs need to surround themselves with key people. Daniel Langlois, for example, had his wife, who was his Vice-President of Visual Research, as well as Dave McCray, who was his sales representative in the United States, Claude Cajolet, his R&D Vice-President, and Pierre Nelis, his right-hand man. Entrepreneurs need the additional skills of the people around them. They must forge relationships based on trust and communication, because an entrepreneur "who works in a vacuum is bound to fail." They also need to draw up "psychological contracts" so that everyone concerned knows what to expect of the others.

Based on his experience, Pierre Nelis came to understand that entrepreneurs do not evolve easily in structures that are organized mechanically. They need an organic human resources system that is highly flexible and adaptable. Their key people therefore need to be open-minded, amenable and also versatile, in terms of both their skills and their personality. He describes this requirement as follows:

"If you're going to have versatile skills and a flexible attitude, you need a general basic education in which you've learned to work with different tools – finance, human resources management and so on. Specialists can be hired as they're needed."

Whoever the entrepreneur may be, the working relationship must be built on generalist foundations, otherwise "nobody is comfortable, even if the generalist is highly competent and versatile." How, then, does this attitude translate into everyday terms? The answer is: primarily through an open mindset and open-minded behavior, and through an amenable personality that is able to respond to the entrepreneur's bursts of spontaneity, because:

"[The entrepreneur] won't plan a business trip, he'll just go when the opportunity arises. You have to be a multi-tasker, able to understand different scenarios and different cultures. In a shifting environment, problems emerge from all sides. You really have to be versatile to deal with it all. Someone with a Cartesian mindset wouldn't be able to manage three or four things at once and would never survive in a highly entrepreneurial environment."

In an entrepreneurial situation, the lives of managers are often difficult. They must be able to adjust to their pace and speed. Being familiar with the management field, managers may sometimes find it hard to adjust to entrepreneurial contingencies. Entrepreneurs, for their part, are never content simply with their own specialty field, but are often drawn to other sectors too. In contrast, they tend to regard their specialty field as their own personal domain – so you enter it at your peril! Pierre Nelis talks about how he was able to gain access to Softimage's R&D committee meetings:

"It's a real dilemma. You need to learn all about the entrepreneur's personal domain, but the entrepreneur doesn't want you to! Daniel [Langlois] didn't understand why I wanted to know all about the firm's intrinsic core. It knocked him off balance. All I wanted was to understand the secret recipe – for

example, how they used computer code to create realistic hair on a movie screen. You have to know how the heart functions if you're going to be able to control the lungs and kidneys. At the same time, the entrepreneur mustn't feel as if you're stepping on his toes. You really have to explain the whys and wherefores to him."

After weeks of sitting in on R&D committee meetings, Pierre Nelis was able to understand the "ins and outs" of Softimage. He questioned his interlocutors and asked them about their ideas, because he felt this was the only way of achieving excellence and establishing the elements required to develop and market products.

Regardless of their qualifications and education, an entrepreneur's key people must be able to adjust to different situations – "they need to be open minded, willing to step away from the beaten path, and leave established paradigms aside". This is the basic definition of a "facilitator" – someone whose role lies between true management and true entrepreneurship. How, though, can facilitators learn to adjust to different entrepreneurial styles? Pierre Nelis does not really have an answer to this question, because things like this are not taught in management schools. He suggests that students "go and work with founding owner-managers, in cooperative-type arrangements". He also suggests keeping abreast of world trends, because "these days you can't make do with the local news, you have to visit websites like investors.com, msnbc.com and read newspapers such as *Le Monde* and the *Wall Street Journal*".

In preserving a guiding thread throughout his activities, Pierre Nelis has been able to maintain his network of contacts. He has also concentrated more on quality than on quantity, with the result that his telephone has continued to ring and word-of-mouth referrals are still being made.

His main advice to entrepreneurs is never to burn their bridges, because "life goes on. People move on to other things and turn to other people." A rational person, he does not believe in astrology, although he does recognize the importance of luck in his own life and the lives of all the entrepreneurs he has met in the course of his career:

"It's as if all the pieces fall into place at some point. Rather like a game of chess: you make two moves, and the third becomes inevitable. You have to organize things so that your basic blueprint is conducive to what you want, but then you almost have to cross your fingers and hope! Is luck a random thing, or can you influence it?"

Pierre Nelis does not have an answer.

MIGHT PIERRE NELIS HAVE A FUTURE AS A TEACHER?

"I like to choose what I do and the people with whom I do it."

A career as a teacher has never been a priority for Pierre Nelis, just as he had never planned "to become a businessman. All the psychological tests said I should, but I laughed at them. It seemed so ridiculous." Yet, in the late summer of 2003, Anne Mesny, a Professor of Management at HEC Montreal, offered him the opportunity to teach a management course in the Bachelor's program. "It was one of the greatest experiences of my life!" he says.

Is he on the cusp of yet another period of his life, one that will allow him to think about organizations and the human beings who create and develop them? Perhaps there is a new career waiting for him – teaching and tutoring, and maybe even writing? Who knows!

ENDNOTES

1. This case was translated by Benjamin Waterhouse.
2. Pierre Nelis was an invited speaker in the entrepreneurship courses taught by one of the case authors at HEC Montreal. However, unless otherwise indicated, the information presented here was obtained from an interview with the authors in 2004.
3. Claude Cajolet, Vice-President, R & D, and Pierre Nelis both had their first children at about the same time.

4. When the family immigrated to Quebec, Marc-Michel and Louise Nelis adopted Jean-Pierre Buyle, who was the best friend of their oldest son Luc. Pierre became the youngest of five children: two older brothers, followed by a sister, another brother and then Pierre.
5. Roberval School, in northeastern Montreal, is located behind the Jean-Talon Hospital in the borough of Rosemont.
6. Pierre Nelis would not go back to school until 1995, when he took the Executive Development Course offered by McGill University, a kind of mini-MBA with the same teachers but without the status, offering practical, short-term training in management, marketing, finance, ethics, human resources and other similar subjects. Since he was still with Softimage at the time, he took courses in the evenings and on weekends, and in 1996 went on to take the advanced course.
7. The SPINC, located in southwest Montreal, is a business partner for young enterprises working with digital technology in film, television and Web TV. It provides full support for innovative high-tech companies, referring them to the appropriate government programs, and sometimes to venture capital corporations. See its website at <http://www.spinc.ca/Acceuil.htm>.