Meet the five Solvay finalists who became CEO for a day!

Five Master students from Solvay Brussels School - ULB, Odgers Berndtson’s exclusive partner for their “CEO for a Day” event, have been selected for a match-up with five CEOs. See what they learned from this amazing experience!

Emma Declercq who spent a day with Thierry Geerts, CEO of Google Belgium

It was great to experience Google first-hand. Getting to know its activities, and impact on their business partners made me realize it is so much more than an IT company. Meeting Pieter I learned that sales at Google is not just about selling ad space, but about coaching companies to thrive thanks to a strategic digital backbone. Meeting Laura I learned about the entrepreneurial spirit in every part of the company as well as the enormous trust and autonomy that empowers every individual.

Last but not least, spending the day with Thierry Geerts let me experience the enormous passion he leads with. His humility would not allow me to say it, but the way he envisions our digital future and guides Belgium through (see his book, Digitalis) cannot leave anyone unaffected.

“Shoot for the moon”

In the CEOx3Day competition by Odgers Berndtson, I was happy to be selected among the five final students to spend one day with a CEO. And not just a CEO, but one of my all-time favourites: Thierry Geerts, Country Director of Google Belgium!

What were the takeaways?

Interview with Emma

What was it like being CEO for a day?

Quite intense, to be honest. The day was packed with two (book) presentations, internal meetings and a press interview. Thierry is a remarkably dynamic person with a seemingly endless amount of energy. One could really feel his passion for the vision and message he carries out each day.

How was your contact with Thierry?

We had quite some conversation time during the car drives. Thierry was very approachable and open. One can feel comfortable bringing up any topic with him; he answered my questions in a franc way.

How would you describe his leadership style?

• Humble

Right from the start, Thierry openly asked for any feedback on his presentation or leadership style. But this is only a token of his humility. He also keeps a casual style, insists on calling him by his first name etc. This makes him very approachable as a leader.

• Empowering

Thierry has a great positive attitude. Despite his vision for change, he never criticizes anyone or anything in particular. This gives an empowering drive from a perspective of improvement. It was remarkable how self-driven people work at Google: one team due a transition would not have a manager for a certain time, but the team
kept working as usual! This is unthinkable in a usual company, but is enabled thanks to a culture of trust and empowerment.

- **Supportive**

Despite the entrepreneurial culture with much freedom, Thierry is always there to have people’s back. In moments of difficulty, he shows empathy and suggests possible ways of thinking. And it works! The company grows at an incredible rate year-over-year and rarely anyone is fired.

How would you describe Google’s culture, as you observed it today?

- **Entrepreneurial**

I was impressed by the level of entrepreneurship in the (even though large) company. The entrepreneurial spirit is present in every project, from supporting functions to sales. As Thierry would say, “the industrial model is dead, in order to be agile in this rapidly evolving environment we need everyone’s thinking.”

- **With an eye for wellbeing**

Google invests a lot in its employees: The office space has an energizing interior design, a healthy lunch is freely available at the canteen, and the policy regarding working from home is very flexible.

- **Stimulating for personal development**

As Google wants to attract and retain first-class and highly driven individuals, it has a mechanism to support them in their professional development. Employees receive training based on their career goals and get opportunities to be transferred abroad. They carry an open vision on wanting the best for an employee, whether in- or outside the company.

What part(s) of the day did you enjoy most?

Firstly, the opportunity to observe Thierry and his activities, feeding my curiosity about his life and leadership style. He has a very modern style that appeals to young people and is 100% future-proof.

Secondly were definitely the one-on-one meetings with two Google’s employees. This gave me a deeper perspective on why they joined Google as well as insights in their experiences and developments within the company.

What were the most important lessons you learned about leadership?

When one thinks of a leader, one might want to “do things right” or at least “not be a bad manager”. But in the end it is not about seeking perfection. It is about having a passion, having a vision and empowering people.

Key in Thierry’s success is that he is the right person in the right place. His vision and values stroke extremely well with those of Google in so far that he almost embodies them. This underlines two things: (1) taking the time to select the right person for a job is key, and (2) choosing for a job and purpose you are passionate about definitely pays off in the long run.

Was being a CEO different from what you thought it would be?

It is less glamourous than I imagined! Despite his position, Thierry is often shamelessly bombarded with critics, doubts and even conspiracy theories. I must say to admire his patience to listen and explain time after time.

Also, Thierry is always taking care of others (his employees, PR, external stakeholders), but who takes care of him? As is often said, “it can be lonely at the top” and I can imagine that in tough times or when tough decisions need to be made one really needs to have character.

What did you learn about yourself through the process?

During the coaching session with one of the employees (Laura), she questioned the choices I am currently making. She asked why I had done certain experiences, why I am making certain career choices... everything! This gave me refreshing insights and made me more conscious of my own way of thinking.

Could you apply anything you learned already in your life or studies?

Absolutely. It made me realize that digitalization does not only have a profound impact on how we do marketing, but on complete business models altogether! It will have to change the way we think in any sector, so better get acknowledged with it.

Why do you think initiatives like this are important for students?

- It has multiple advantages for students, who can observe: the importance and specifics of a certain company culture
- a certain leadership style and its impact on the organization
- career choices and their impact on employees’ and CEO’s lives
Meet Jan-Willem Van Lancker who spent a day with Axel Smits, CEO of PwC Belgium

I had the honor to meet and spend a day with Axel Smits, CEO of PwC Belgium, as I was selected as one of the five winners of the contest “CEO for a Day”, organized by Odgers Berndtson.

I was impressed by the amount of preparation PwC Belgium put into this day. An example of this was the picture below: my name on the big LED screen at the reception of their Brussels office.

But next to the glamour, it was of course a learning opportunity about leadership, social skills and charisma. For me, Axel is the personification of a modern leader. He doesn't impose any form of hierarchy, but he includes his people and leads by example. I was blown away by his calmness and his amount of ‘down to earth’ mentality. He has the ability to see the big picture, and at the same time extract the key points and separate consequence from cause. A balance between 'no-nonsense' and emotional intelligence makes his colleagues want to follow him.

I would like to thank everyone who made this day possible from the bottom of my heart. It was an invaluable experience and you walk away with new insights about leadership, business, but most importantly: your own future. To all Solvay Brussels School students: take this opportunity with both hands.

Interview with Jan-Willem

What was it like being CEO for a day?

It was a rollercoaster ride from start to finish. Lots of impressions were packed into one day, but I had a general feeling of enrichment at the end of the day. Now, after two days, my gut feeling was able to settle, and I can place everything that happened.

How was your contact with Axel Smits?

At first, I had a bit of healthy nerves, as I was walking towards his office, but within a split second, that disappeared. Axel is extremely open, calm and sociable. I had an immediate connection with him. It all came very naturally. We instantly had an interesting conversation about our backgrounds and thoughts on the future, which lasted for an hour. Throughout the entire day, I felt very comfortable in his presence. He tried to include me as much as possible in the different meetings, which made the entire experience even more insightful.

How would you describe his leadership style?

Exactly as the kind of leader I would want to follow. He doesn't enforce any authority; he cultivates it with his people. He leads by example. It’s his commitment to the firm, his vision, his attitude towards his colleagues, his strong analytical mindset and his communicative power that makes him stand out. I think that is a very strong idea. The idea of a leader who is respected and accepted by everyone.

How would you describe PwC's culture, as you observed it today?

It's a very horizontal organization. The human aspect is very prominent in the firm. They are in a business were relationships are very important and that is reflected within the firm. They are very aware of the type of people they hire. Millennials mostly. Their style of interaction is quite direct and open. Decisions are being taken in a consensus-building approach. I believe people skills are very important to the recruitment team.

What part(s) of the day did you enjoy most?

I liked the interaction with Axel most, in every part of the day. I felt like I could resonate with him on a deeper level. I'm passionate about interesting conversations and having an open mind to different viewpoints. In a more concrete way, I think the IFS meeting was one of the most interesting parts for me to attend. It was very hands-on. The TLT lunch was very open and relaxed. A great way to get to know the people at the top of the firm. And finally, the time spent at the experience center was extraordinary because I really felt like they went out of their way to make the experience as valuable as possible for me. In the end, it felt like I was coming back tomorrow to join work life at PwC again, and I think that summarizes it all.

What were the most important lessons you learned about leadership?

Leadership is found everywhere. It's not about giving orders and having things done for you. Those are some of the aspects that come along with the responsibility of being a leader. Leadership is about human interaction and attitude. That is the core. It starts from how you approach other people. That might seem a very simple insight, but I think it is often overlooked. Experience, skills, etc... These are all required, but it's not the foundation. The cornerstone of leadership is compassion.

Was being a CEO different from what you thought it would be?

I was surprised by how hands on the work of the CEO was. To give you an example: I attended an internal meeting, led by the COO, which was about internal functions of the firm. The topics that were discussed there were very concrete and, in a way, ordinary. I was surprised by the breadth of responsibilities the CEO bears. I don’t know if that’s the case for every CEO, but I realize that Axel is very involved in every part of the business. Next to that, I learned that Axel also still has a client portfolio which he’s responsible for. This way he’s never too far away from the core activities of PwC. Impressive.

What did you learn about yourself through the process?

I'm still uncertain about what I want to do during my career, but I learned the importance of a professional atmosphere where you’re allowed to be yourself and express yourself, where your thoughts are being heard and where you feel that you have an impact. I don't know whether I will work in a professional services firm, but in terms of company culture, I could definitely see myself work at PwC, and that's an important insight for me.

How did the day influence how you look at your own career?

See previous question. What I want to add is the importance of working for someone who you look up to and who you can learn from every single day. Having a boss that deserves it to be in
that position and that conveys his knowledge on you is so important in the beginning of your career. I will look for that.

Could you apply anything you learned already in your life or studies?

Of course, my background helped to understand everything that was happening that day. Without some basic understanding of PwC’s activities and business in general, the experience would be less useful, but the day was about leadership and touching upon a professional work environment. How you approach something mentally will always outweigh your skills and background. If you open your mind for new ideas and come prepared, I think you are up for a lot of challenges.

Why do you think initiatives like this are important for students?

They offer you a unique view into your own potential future. It’s an angle you’re never able to take, nowhere. You could do an internship for two months at a firm and never have this point of view. That’s where the power of this program lies. You follow and engage with a person who has built a career and has literally reached the top of the corporate world, for an entire day. I would recommend this program to every student who has the possibility.

How would you summarize your experience in the CEO for a Day program?

Natural, comforting, surprising, flattering, challenging and invaluable.
Interview with Alysée Spencer who learned a lot from Paul Dujardin, CEO of BOZAR

What was it like being CEO for a day?

I have realized how important it is to be flexible and to adapt to the different working environments. Indeed, we first started the day with a meeting gathering all the different artistic sectors of BOZAR. It was captivating to see all managers, leading by Paul Dujardin, exchanging ideas and solutions to the future needs of the BOZAR visitors. Then, we had an appointment with the executive committee. Listening to the missions, visions and values of BOZAR made me realize that BOZAR is way more than an exhibition center. It has a real impact on the society. They want to create a house that leaves room for everyone’s creativity. Afterwards, Paul Dujardin and I went by bike to the Embassy of the Czech Republic. During the discussion with Pavel Klucky, Ambassador of Czech Republic, I have understood that BOZAR has a significant role at the international level. BOZAR is the bridge between Belgium’s culture and the world. Back at BOZAR, I was delighted to go to the Bernard Van Orley exhibition and looked at the Renaissance masterpieces. I also had the chance to visit Coudenberg Palace and to make a journey through 16th century Brussels. To end a working day on a pleasant way, we went to the Vernissage of Richard Venlet and BXL Makers. It was fascinating to compare the two artistic worlds and to see how Art has evolved and will continue to do so.

How was your contact with Paul?

In my opinion Paul Dujardin is a very effective leader. He does not have time to waste since he has a very tight schedule that he manages to follow perfectly. My contact with him was mainly based on observation and listening.

How would you describe his leadership style?

According to me, Paul Dujardin is a “conceptual leader”. He has this great ability to work with ideas and concepts and to create a strong vision or a good strategic plan for the challenges faced by the different sectors of BOZAR. He can provide good guidance that will put BOZAR goals into words and practice.

How would you describe Bozar’s culture, as you observed it today?

BOZAR is a complex institution that has different departments: exhibition, music, architecture, film, literature, debates, etc. The main values of BOZAR are universal human rights, the socially-adjusted market economy and the democratic foundations. Through the different activities organized by BOZAR, they try to export these ideals to other continents. However, since BOZAR is a federal institution with a public interest, it has a huge impact on their mission. Indeed, having €15 million from the federal government and other revenue from different other sources (philanthropy) to entertain good partnerships and manage co-projects, that have a social purpose fulfilling the future demands of the visitors in term of global warming and sustainability, is not an easy task.

What part(s) of the day did you enjoy most?

I enjoyed the executive committee appointment a lot. At this moment, I realized how lucky I was to have the opportunity to participate to such an important meeting. Right before it starts, I had the pleasure to meet Didier Verboomen, secretary general at BOZAR that explained me how the discussion would unfold and what were the different points that were going to be addressed. I had the chance to exchange with him about leadership, youth and the corporate culture of BOZAR. During the discussion, it was interesting to listen about the mission, vision and values of the company and to observe how the board of direction take actions to address the actual issues and future projects.

What were the most important lessons you learned about leadership?

As a future leader, I have noticed that flexibility is a key success factor. You should be able to deal with change and adapt to the different working environments. You also need to deal with uncertainties. For example, I had to be able to ride a bike in heels under the rain to reach the Czech Republic Embassy and still be presentable in front of the ambassadors. Fortunately, I like being challenged and getting out of my comfort zone. Being independent is crucial. As I had an issue with the bike on the way to go to the Czech Republic Embassy, I have lost Paul Dujardin, that did not want to be late at the meeting with Pavel Klucky, Ambassador of Czech Republic. Since the CEO of BOZAR put some important documents in my purse, he had it with him. Successfully, without my phone left in my bag and without knowing the address of the meeting, I have found the Czech Republic Embassy with the help of a nice florist who had already made a delivery to them.

Was being a CEO different from what you thought it would be?

I was thinking that a CEO has a well-planned and organized schedule. I quickly realized that this was not the case. After my day with Paul Dujardin, I think dealing with changes and uncertainties are for me the most important aspects of a CEO today.

What did you learn about yourself through the process?

I have discovered that I can easily adapt to different professional situations. I have also noticed that I like to create positive relationships with others. Entertain good relationships and engage others toward a common goal will be my leadership style as I am energetic, talkative and socially active. However, after spending the day with Paul Dujardin, I have realized that, what makes a good leader is the right combination between human, conceptual and technical skills.

How did the day influence how you look at your own career?

I think being a CEO today is not an easy task. You need to have a huge background and lots of knowledges and skills in different sectors. I think I will look at a first job where I can learn a lot and follow training sessions to pop up with creative solutions to the challenges faced by my clients.

Could you apply anything you learned already in your life or studies?

During the first meeting I have realize how important it is to do brainstorming and to actively listening to the others involved in the projects. During the well-planned and structured executive committee meeting, the good communication between the different directors was crucial to take the appropriate decisions regarding the actual issues faced and the approval of future promising projects. At the
Czech Republic Embassy, I have recognized that as a CEO of a well-known company, having strong international networking skills is highly important. Good negotiation skills based on trust is also one key success factor. The end of the day activities made me think about the human ability to face change and to evolve according to the environment.

Why do you think initiatives like this are important for students?

I think CEOx1Day Program is a great initiative because it gives us the opportunity to learn on the field what means to be a CEO today. It is a unique chance to understand what CEO’s are looking for in Millennium generation and how could we learn from their experience and continue to improve ourselves and find solutions for future generations needs and demands.

How would you summarize your experience in the CEO for a Day program?

I am delighted to have the chance to spend a whole busy and interesting day with Paul Dujardin, CEO of BOZAR. It was the perfect mix between leadership and culture. During the rigorous selection process, I have learned about my leadership style through the Hogan Personality assessment and I have met wonderful persons. It was an amazing experience that succeeded to challenge me and give me the importance of having long-term objectives in my professional career.

Any last thoughts about the day?

Even though I had a very interesting day at every level in term of leadership, independence, sport and culture, I am quite disappointed not to have had the chance to share with Paul Dujardin a nice discussion about youth, leadership and the future definition of Art impacted by the technological innovations.
Interview with Oliviero Gianfagna who spent a day with Charles-Henri de Maleissye, CEO of Fnac Vanden Borre

What was it like being CEO for a day?

This day gave me the opportunity to learn, from the beginning until the end. I discovered the retail sector through the eyes of the CEO, but also thanks to several meeting with other departments, such as Marketing or Sales. Then, I also had a deep and full understanding of the culture and people that drive the business of Fnac Vanden Borre. I realized the important role that the CEO plays in the decisions at every layer of the organization, from the contact with the salespersons in the shops up to the relationships and negotiations with partners and other stakeholders.

How was your contact with Charles-Henri de Maleissye?

Charles-Henri de Maleissye has been very kind, direct and human. He always introduced me to the people we were meeting along the day as if I were really part of their team. He never hesitated to give me further and detailed explanations to let me play an active role during every meeting; this allowed me to ask a lot of questions and get very useful feedbacks from them.

How would you describe his leadership style?

Charles-Henri de Maleissye keeps an eye on every aspect of his company. It seemed to me that every employee can count on him to ask questions and get his opinion and feedback. This allows him to be perceived as a passionate, curious and human leader. His true and authentic passion towards his job and the organization is clear to everyone; I think that this can really empower all his employees to be involved directly in the decision making of the company.

How would you describe Fnac Vanden Borre’s culture, as you observed it today?

I think that there are three words that really describe the culture of Fnac Vanden Borre:

1. **Innovation**: Despite the upcoming and aggressive competition from the pure online players in the retail industry, Fnac Vanden Borre always work very hard to improve their business model and frame it to face new technologies and megatrends in order to reinforce their position and grow.

2. **Customer Centricity**: The customer is at the center of every decision at Fnac Vanden Borre. They differentiate from the competitors thanks to this attention towards their customers.

3. **Values**: The heritage from Darty and Fnac imply that important pillars and values must be respected and honored (“Contrat de confiance” – “Every day the lowest price”). Despite the increasing competition in the retail sector, Vanden Borre sticks to its values and let them become true differentiation factors.

"Charles-Henri is an incredibly effective leader because he is passionate about his job. This lesson and the rigorous selection process to become a finalist in CEO for a Day made me realize the importance of having a long-term objective in my career".

What were the most important lessons you learned about leadership?

Charles-Henri de Maleissye listens very accurately to all his employees, ask them the right questions and let them feel the passion that he has towards his company and their business. His attention to the details and his passion towards the company help him to lead everyone towards a common goal. This made me think about the importance that passion and culture have on leadership: Charles-Henri de Maleissye is an incredibly effective leader because he is passionate about his job and he believes in the culture of his company, by sharing it every day with all stakeholders.

Was being a CEO different from what you thought it would be?

I did not expect a CEO to be so human and passionate towards every aspect of his business. I expected that he had more a representative role. I thought that the CEO was there to communicate with all parties, but I really did not expect that he was so deeply concerned and involved in every decision of the company.

What did you learn about yourself through the process?

First, the Hogan test helped me spot the shortcomings of my personality and, most importantly, how people perceive my behavior in several situations. Then, the whole day with the CEO really taught me how to behave in critical situations or meetings and the importance of decision making. I also learnt a lot about the importance of listening, asking the right questions and communication: I am already working on these aspects, but the process really encouraged me to improve my skills in these activities.

What part(s) of the day did you enjoy most?

There were two moments of the day that really meant a lot to me:

1. **Starting the day by watching the warehouse and departure of trucks for the deliveries made me understand that the CEO at Fnac Vanden Borre is active in all activities of the company**.

2. **Visiting a Vanden Borre shop together with the CEO made me realize how much attention the whole organization gives to the details. In fact, I was really astonished by the extensive knowledge that the CEO had concerning all the little details of their shops: from the position of the products on the shelves to the design of the shop**.

How did the day influence how you look at your own career?

The whole process made me realize about the importance of having a long-term objective in my career. Every job I will be doing in the following years will have an impact on my career and it is crucial to have clear in my mind where I want to go. Another important lesson was that it is crucial to know an industry and the people working in it before applying for certain positions or firms: in fact, there might very good opportunities that could match with my personality and career goals within industries and firms I would have never though before.
Then, I also learnt the importance that the personal fit between me and the culture of a firm I would work for have a decisive impact on my performance at work and personal satisfaction.

**Could you apply anything you learned already in your life or studies?**

I will certainly follow the suggestions of improvement given by the Hogan personality test. Then, the lessons I learnt about leadership and decision making will be very useful when I will be starting my career at PwC in the next months.

**Why do you think initiatives like this are important for students?**

As a student it is very difficult to have the chance of being involved with corporations, and even less at this CEO level. Therefore, this initiative is really the very first occasion a student can have to know a company and its sector from the perspective of the CEO, the person that is clearly involved in many decisions of the business. Then I find very useful for students to understand the business of companies that we probably do not really know and that could become very attractive to us as final year students and future job seekers.

**How would you summarize your experience in the CEO for a Day program?**

The whole program has been an incredible learning opportunity. I enjoyed the selection process and the day spent with the Partners at the Odgers Berndtson offices. I find that they really gave us a lot of their attention and time, by sharing with us all the passion they have towards the Executive Search business. The program gave me the opportunity to learn about my self and to give me valuable insights that I will certainly take into consideration during my career.
Interview with Martin Nolf who spent a day with Bernard Delvaux, CEO of Sonaca

What was it like being CEO for a day?

Full of learnings! It made me realize even more that university is far too focused on teaching concepts, theoretical frameworks and does not dedicate enough time to “soft-skills”. I have never spent time at university working on my team-leading, people’s management skills and I believe that spending a day as a CEO helped me be more aware about the importance of the above-mentioned skills.

How was your contact with Bernard Delvaux?

Bernard Delvaux was very friendly and conscious about my presence at Sonaca. At the end of the day, he dedicated about one hour to one-on-one discussion and was truly open to discussion regarding the strategy of the firm and the way he deals with his team.

How would you describe his leadership style?

I do not have an answer to this question. During the entire day, I have been in meetings with very different types of people ranging from the President to Trade Unions Officials. What mostly amazed me is the way Bernard Delvaux manages to juggle between different leadership styles according to his audience. Nevertheless, his transparency is a key point I have observed throughout the day no matter the audience or the leadership style he adopted.

What part(s) of the day did you enjoy most?

The most unexpected meeting of the day was that with Trade Union Officials. I had never been confronted to Trade Unions in the past but was impressed by Bernard Delvaux’s way of dealing with conflicting interests.

What were the most important lessons you learned about leadership?

Leadership is about flexibility. That refers to my answer to the previous question “How would you describe his leadership style?”. I was amazed to see someone capable of pivoting, adapting to his audience. At the same time, I find it interesting to see that his change in leadership style did not change anything to the messages he wanted to share.

Could you apply anything you learned already in your life or studies?

Definitely! As the president of a student association, I am willing to translate Bernard Delvaux’s way of making decisions and leading teams into my own work.

Why do you think initiatives like this are important for students?

CEOx1Day is probably the best type of mentoring experience you can have. I think students should take more opportunities to be mentored, especially with mentors of such high quality.