



High Flyer

When Phil Schwan was developing a data-storage product called Lustre, he didn't expect to be working for one of the companies that picked up his product, on the other side of the world.

Schwan, 30, leads the software division at DownUnder GeoSolutions (DuGeo). He looks after a team of 15 people in Australia and Malaysia, and will supervise employees at the new office in Canada, to open in May.

The US-born head of software is responsible for overseeing development of the DUG range of geophysical software, which the company has successfully launched into the international petroleum industry.

One of the reasons he joined DuGeo and the oil and gas industry was a desire to 'solve real problems for people'. "It's all about solving problems for our clients and seeing that we can make a real difference in their business... enabling them to do something they couldn't before, or do it more efficiently."

He said his strengths lie in execution, not invention, and that is what he focuses on at DuGeo. "We have a brilliant research team, and I'm there to help turn their ideas and algorithms into working, commercialised software that people can use, as quickly as possible."

Prior to Schwan joining DuGeo, the company had already developed software for internal

use, providing geophysical services to the oil and gas industry. "Our service business was always cutting-edge, always had needs that off-the-shelf software couldn't meet, so they had no choice but to write their own", he said.

"Often we'd present a client's work to them using our software, and they'd say 'we have to have a copy of this!' You can only say 'sorry, it's not for sale' so many times before you start to realise you have something special that you should get out there."

"I was hired to take that internal effort and produce something we could sell commercially, which is very different. We needed to take a product that suited one company's needs and make it useful to a much wider audience.

He now calls Perth home, but came to Australia to 'enjoy unemployment' after selling his previous company in 2007. Cluster File Systems (CFS) developed Lustre, a data-storage product for top 100 supercomputers, including those used by the US Government. "We went after contracts that very few people wanted because they were too demanding or too difficult", he said.

Schwan was Chief Executive Officer and co-founder of CFS, managing a team of 70 people for five years prior to selling the company to Sun Microsystems.

In Australia, Schwan met the team at DuGeo as they were using his Lustre product. He sees

DownUnder GeoSolutions Phil Schwan at work.

a lot of parallels between DuGeo and CFS. "I'm attracted to companies that are disruptive, that change people's ideas about what's possible."

At CFS, Schwan said most of the staff worked from home, with a single office in Beijing. "That kind of worldwide effort was interesting to manage", he said. It has been serving him well at DuGeo. "I'm only interested in hiring absolutely top people, and they're extremely rare. One way you grow the team is to look worldwide, and let them live where they want."

Schwan works hard and sometimes clocks up 90 hours in a week. To him there is no difference between a work day and the weekend, but he doesn't ask his team to work the same hours. "When they work late, it's because we're all passionate about what we're creating, and everyone has a stake in its success."

His inability to take weekends was the reason Schwan took two years off prior to his current role, during which he obtained his private pilot's licence. "I've always wanted to learn to fly and it's a great way to focus on something else", he said. "It doesn't matter what else is going on in your life, you get in the plane, and that's your focus." Schwan hired a plane in Sydney and flew around eastern Australia, stopping in remote towns along the way. "It was one of the most enjoyable experiences I've ever had, and in my next two years off, I'd love to do something like that elsewhere in the world." ■