Michael Gould, Anaplan: from cowshed to spreadsheet killer

ANDREW BOUNDS

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In Silicon Valley, the garage is the first home of many a tech startup in popular imagination. In northern England, it should be the barn.

Where cattle once sheltered, Michael Gould first developed software that is used by some of the world's biggest companies. His company Anaplan styles itself the "spreadsheet killer" because its cloud-based software enables business planning on a single system. It has conquered territory from IBM, Oracle and SAP.

"The tools that were out there were not really meeting the needs of businesses," he says. So he came up with his own.

Mr Gould started the seven-year-old company in a converted barn at his North Yorkshire farmhouse and has kept it true to its origins by dividing re search work between the nearby cathedral city of York and San Francisco, where it has its headquarters.

The core research work remains in the north of England, however, and Anaplan last year moved to a 19th century former warehouse on the bank of the river Ouse. Six years ago, the warehouse was flooded. Now it has been revamp ed, including raised windows on the ground floor that would allow people to continue working if the river rose again, although there is an escape bridge from an upper floor. The building has balconies and bike racks, plenty of light and bright carpets, along with the free food beloved of tech companies.

A decent workspace is vital to at tract decent workers, says Mr Gould.

Anaplan's 30,000-plus clients include Kimberly-Clark, Diageo and Aviva. HP — itself founded in a Palo Alto garage — says Anaplan has sharply cut the time taken to set targets for thousands of sales reps across the globe. Before that, it says, "the data sat in disconnected spreadsheets around the world".

Guy Haddleton, Anaplan's first investor and now chairman, is more effusive: "Michael's an incredible mathematician with a phenomenal talent for coding."

That talent attracted $100m of funding from Workday and Shasta Ventures, among others, for Anaplan last year, for an undisclosed stake.

Anaplan charges a subscription for its products, and Mr Gould says bookings more than doubled in 2014, but he dec lines to reveal turnover. Revenues are ploughed back into funding expansion: "We probably could be profitable [now]

if we wanted to be."

Anaplan is in the process of opening a development centre in Paris to widen its access to software engineers. "We felt like we probably weren't going to be able to expand fast enough here in York and in San Francisco and so it made sense to have a third location for the development team," says Mr Gould.

Mr Gould learnt to code thanks to a teacher who brought a computer in to school and ran an after-school club: "He was learning about it himself. A couple of steps ahead of the pupils, and sharing his interest and enthusiasm with us."

There seems little structured opportunity for school students to learn real programming, he laments. Some Anaplan employees help at coding clubs in York schools.

Mr Gould says Anaplan would not have made it without the "faith" shown by Mr Haddleton, with moral support and money that allowed him and a small team to focus on a fully fledged product before needing to make sales. But he adds: "We never had doubts that the problems we were trying to solve were real and that we had a solution that could address them."

There is a computerlike logic to his answers to questions. On how to sell software: "By making it better than what is on the market." On winning financial backing: "If you've got customers who rave about your product it's easy." On how a programmer, such as himself, copes when an idea for a product becomes a fast-growing business: get a chief executive in, he says. "I am a technical person, not a sales person." His role is chief technology officer.

The first CEO was Mr Haddleton. They had worked together at Adaytum Software, which was founded by the New Zealander in 1990 in Bristol and sold to IBM Cognos in 2003 for $160m. Mr Gould stayed on to update a 20-year-old Cognos program but "it felt like it needed a complete rethink, a complete ground-up rebuild". He left to work on his own software in the barn. With four school-age children, it was a risk but a calculated one. He and his wife have also adopted three young children.

After 18 months he showed the results to Mr Haddleton in 2008. "He understood the vision from the outset," says Mr Gould. He also had the money and the pair became 50/50 partners with $500,000 from Mr Haddleton.

Anaplan made its first sales in 2010, and within a year had raised its first venture capital funding. That paid for an outside CEO, Fred Laluyaux.

Mr Gould says he does not mind diluting his stake in Anaplan, which is un disclosed, because "we need muscle" to compete with bigger, established rivals.

The company is now wrestling with the challenges of growth. It has 12 offices worldwide and has increased staff to more than 400 over the past year, rising to a predicted 650 this year. It has long had a sales office in San Francisco and started hiring developers there last year. But York, where staff will have doubled to 90 over a couple of years, is the secret weapon, Mr Gould says.

"Here, it's a bit harder to find people but we get a very high rate of people accepting job offers. It's very rare that we actually lose anyone, too. And it's a lovely place to live."

York is a medieval walled city of 200,000 people, two hours from London and five from Paris by train. It has two universities, while Leeds and Bradford, which have growing tech sectors, are about 30 miles away.

San Francisco has plenty of coders, says Mr Gould, but also lots of employers. "Everywhere, it's challenging to find peop le. We are trying to grow fast, we're trying to grow our engineering teams, ramp them up very quickly . . . There's clearly a shortage of skills."

Mr Gould says his daily life comprises work or family. But he makes time for family holidays, when they head off to remote locations where WiFi is patchy.

That al most cost him a funding deal in 2011. "One time when [Anaplan was] trying to get a first round of VC funding, we were camping in Northumberland. I had to drive off overnight to get a mobile phone signal to be able to do a conference call with a VC firm in the US."

Now, he says, they call him at his convenience.