

NEW YORK

Transforming Professional Learning

An Interview with Alexander Saint-Amand,
President and Chief Executive Officer, GLG



The atrium of GLG headquarters in New York City

EDITORS' NOTE Alexander Saint-Amand is the chief architect of GLG's mission: to transform the way the world's top professionals share expertise and learn. Saint-Amand joined GLG's team shortly after its founding in 1998, and has been a central figure at the company for most of his professional life, serving as Chief Operating Officer before he became CEO. During a break from college at the University of Virginia, where he studied chemistry, Saint-Amand volunteered as an emergency medical technician and also worked as a reporter at Bloomberg News. During his senior year, he developed a network of the world's top physicians to whom he and GLG's early customers turned for insights on the latest medical breakthroughs. These contacts became GLG's initial teaching membership, known then as the Council of Healthcare Advisors. Saint-Amand began gathering members for periodic roundtable discussions in New York City, and for telephone consultations and other small, interactive convenings. In the 15 years since, GLG's membership has grown to include more than 375,000 of the world's leading policy specialists, academics, engineers, former C-level managers, and other professional leaders, who provide perspective and mentorship to GLG's clients.



Alexander Saint-Amand

COMPANY BRIEF GLG (glg.it) is transforming the way the world's top professionals share expertise and learn. GLG curates custom-learning experiences among professionals and thought leaders across fields, within a rigorous compliance framework. GLG scales one-to-one learning through conversations, mentorships, small-group convenings, surveys, and other interactions with its network of more than 400,000 experts. Global, technology-driven, and nimble, GLG is the world's largest membership for professional learning and expertise. Its almost 1,000 employees work in 21 offices in 12 countries.

How did the concept for GLG come about and how has its mission evolved?

The company was formed in 1999 as a publishing company. We quickly learned the publishing company wasn't working. There was a famous event where one of our non-customers said, "I don't want to read the books, but I would like to talk to the authors." So we started a separate business around expertise, which is what we do today.

Our first customers were investors, and most of our growth from 1999 to 2005 was within the investment community. In 2006, we had aspirations to change how many more types of professionals

learn – not just investors. So we started working with the big strategy consultancies and then with companies, at first mostly in the life sciences industry, in the industrial space with chemicals companies, and with technology companies.

In 2009, at the height of the economic meltdown, our business shrank somewhat, but we continued to believe that what we do, which is scaling one-to-one learning, has very broad applications and that learning and teaching for top professionals needed to change.

Our compliance rigor and reputation have been a boon to our business. What we do reduces the risk that someone acts inappropriately when they're pursuing learning or doing primary research, in the case of an investment firm. Every interaction we arrange is auditable.

We have spent years developing and strengthening our compliance framework, and we have also spent years proving that these new markets work. Over the past two years, the new markets gained traction and our business in financial services began to grow again. We have spent the past year re-articulating what the business is and its broad reach.

In attracting new clients to GLG, do you need to educate them on the value proposition?

Almost all CEOs or senior managers will tell you that one of their greatest challenges is developing their people and the way their employees learn. They need learning to be specific and available, and to take place in a trusted setting.

Adaptivity and specificity are popular themes across education overall right now, and most managers understand that something needs to be done differently.

The challenge is that not every employee is used to learning this way. Many professionals assume that when they want to grow, they need to go to a course for six months or hire a consultant to tell them what to do. We don't believe that; we will put you directly in touch with professionals who can help. This is a big change for many people.

The early adopters of this style of learning were investors and start-ups, where it's all about getting product feedback and market perspective fast. Now we enable that to happen at much larger companies.

Are there core industries you're focused on?

We started with the sciences and we moved into energy and alternative energy, then into

technology. We started with highly technical industries and moved to regulation. We also cover the major segments of the global economy, and we're in Europe, Japan, and the Middle East. In fact, 35 percent of our projects are cross-border.

What prompted your decision to make more of a commitment to New York City?

Our business is all about top professionals interacting across sectors and geographies, and we think New York is the most global city in the same way – almost all professionals come through New York at some point. We started our business here and we want to be based here.

How does your new office space at One Grand Central Place in Midtown Manhattan suit your platform?

We have organized millions of interactions around the world, but we had never conducted them in our own space. We wanted to build a hosting space that would be welcoming to all the different people we work with.

Beyond that, we also wanted the space to be incredibly flexible and to create collaboration and rewarding opportunities for our employees. So our architect, Clive Wilkinson, designed around the concept of activity-based working, which means that no one has an assigned desk but everyone has a lot of different spaces to work at depending on his or her needs.

What service does GLG Share provide your members?

We have an internal incubator called GLG Labs that has launched a few businesses over the past year, one of which is called GLG Share. It offers venture-backed entrepreneurs who have raised a little bit of capital unlimited access to our teaching membership.

What are key traits you seek in potential employees?

We screen for curiosity and responsibility. The best professionals here have some industry expertise, but the most important trait they all have in common is an incredible enthusiasm for learning and developing that next learning project.

Responsibility is also critical, because when you join GLG as a service professional or an engineer, we're giving you more responsibility than almost anywhere else; that learning product is yours and yours alone.

When you are working with a CEO on what learning they are looking to foster, there is no way someone else can have the same investment in that project and its success as you do. ●