

[Article translated from French]

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## The cleaning company that wants to devour the world

In twenty years, Franck Julien has transformed Atalian into a group of 125,000 people. And it's not over.

Gilles Charpentier still remembers their meeting five or six years ago at Brussels station. That day, their wives, who have been friends for years, met by chance on the platform. On the train to Paris, they exchanged their latest news. The two men sat side by side, had their noses plunged into the newspaper, a little embarrassed. Suddenly, Franck Julien raises his head and asks: "By the way, what do you do?" "I'm a fishmonger," says the businessman, who was then the owner of a large smoked salmon producer MerAlliance. "That's fortunate, I'm a cleaner. We can probably get along! Upon arrival at Gare du Nord, an hour later, Gilles Charpentier understood what kind of "cleaner" he was dealing with: "The entrepreneurial archetype, passionate and inhabited by his profession, with a rare dose of energy. An intuitive man determined to devour the world.

The result is spectacular. In twenty years, Franck Julien transformed the industrial cleaning company, founded by his grandfather, into a multinational corporation. Its name, Atalian, speaks only to professionals. Nobody notices its employees: they cook in canteens, they transport luggage to airports, they vacuum when offices are deserted, watch warehouses at night. Atalian has become one of the top 5 leading providers of outsourced services to companies. And his army of invisibles exceeds 125,000 people. More than Vivendi, Pernod Ricard, Dassault, Hermès and Bic combined!

"With this operation, we have really gone up a notch," says Franck Julien, who has been travelling across the United States these past few days, to present the Group's new configuration to the American teams. Of course it has been an expensive affair. At 612 million euros, the price is equivalent to ten years of Servest's operating profits. That is almost twice as much as what Atalian is used to paying. The bill has forced the group to go into significant debt, and very exceptionally, Franck Julien has agreed to unlock his capital to make room for the current shareholders of Servest. They now hold 5% of Atalian, while the Julien family retains the remaining 95%, thanks to a company located in Luxembourg.

### **"The world map will be complete"**

"We broke the piggy bank but I do not regret it, assures the boss, all the while staring his interlocutor straight in the eyes. With Servest we have become one of the top ten groups of the sector in Great Britain, one of the large countries we were missing. There are still four or five gaps to fill, and after that we will be done. The world map will be complete."

There is little chance, however, that Franck Julien will detach himself in the short term. Since June 2017, he has let go of the operational management and contents himself on paper, with the role of president of the holding company, and lives in Brussels.

He also devotes a little time to the economic French newspaper La Tribune, which he bought in 2017 and hopes to make profitable this year. But in practice, he lives, sleeps, eats and smokes Atalian.

At 51 years of age, « he continues to call everyone in the Group and imposes his sometimes harsh rhythm», attests an executive. "Even when we go on weekends together, it's all about work: at every opportunity he will talk about his projects, of his acquisitions..." confides Gilles Charpentier, who has become one of his best friends. "The professionals took him for a teenager, no one saw him coming and the Group has become a leader."

### **A company executive**

We have an appointment at Vitry-sur-Seine, just near Paris. It is here, on the banks of the Seine, that Franck Julien set-up Atalian's headquarters. A reasonable suburb, for a group whose wages are low and who has ultra-thin margins, as is the case across the sector: the net result represents less than 0.5% of the turnover. At the entrance, an old marble plaque recalls, in golden letters the previous company name: "Technique Française du Nettoyage" (French Cleaning Technique). In Franck Julien's office on the third floor, there are two black and white portraits of his grandfather Paul and his father Jean-Pierre, the two men he succeeded at the helm of the company.

### **Cleaner from father to son?**

The story is more tumultuous than the perfectly aligned photo frames would suggest. At first there is Paul Julien, a manoeuver that came to Paris from Commeny (Allier) at the beginning of the Second World War. Whilst in a cafe, he notices a window cleaner and thinks there is a profession for him, as goes the family legend. "So he founded a first company, La Rayonnante, in 1939, then another, TFN, in 1944, and the adventure began like that," says his grandson. But it comes to a standstill shortly after. Paul Julien dies in 1951 when his son is only twelve years old. His little empire is then broken up between his daughter, who takes over the Rayonnante, and his son, who takes over TFN after coming of age.

### **Another shock in 1981**

When the left government comes to power in France, Jean-Pierre Julien and his wife Rosalie, also an entrepreneur, pack their bags, entrust their company to a manager and move to Canada. It is in Ottawa, that Franck Julien, the youngest son, began his law studies and passed the bar, with the idea of setting-up a law firm. Eight years later, when the family returns to Paris, the young man continues his studies at the Sorbonne and begins a thesis on free trade agreements.

### **Artificial intelligence**

At the time, it was his older brother who was supposed to eventually take over the cleaning group. "In the family, it was the birthright that prevailed ..."

But the transition did not go as smoothly as expected and one Friday night, Jean-Pierre Julien takes his son Franck aside and gives him an ultimatum: "Either you enter the company or I sell it, it's simple. You have 24 hours to decide. "No more law studies. One night was enough for Franck Julien to accept his father's offer. Not necessarily the easiest decision. He must first of all prove to everyone, including his father and himself, that he can succeed in a position destined for another and that his legitimacy does not solely rest on his family name. "I had to earn my first-name," he concludes.

So here he is, a ball of energy starting at the bottom of the ladder ... and quickly climbing the echelons. He starts as a Head of agency in the east of Paris and after one year becomes regional director. He then takes on the recovery of The Rayonnante, the company which he takes over from the other part of the family after forty years of separation.

One year later he goes to headquarters and reorganizes the central services and then takes over the management of the activities in France. His father hesitates to appoint him as general manager. After all he is only 27 years old, what will the customers think? Yet he resolves himself and the success is there to show.

What follows are years of accelerated growth. The former small company thrives by taking over tasks that companies no longer want to take care of themselves: cleaning offices, grounds maintenance and so on. Added to this are serial acquisitions. More than 280 since 2002, the year Franck Julien took over from his father as head of the Group.

Over the years, the new boss has made Atalian one of the champions of cleaning, making it a major player in neighboring trades such as surveillance or energy management in buildings. Not to mention the hostesses, a specialty of City One, the company set-up by his wife Sophie Pécriaux, also vice president of Atalian. "The professionals took him for a young boy, nobody saw him coming, and the group has become a leader," says a manager.

### **Family affair**

After France, Franck Julien decides to conquer the planet. It is for this purpose that he receives a young candidate in 2006, Matthieu de Baynast. "It was 9:30 pm, he was answering his mail without looking at me, it was strange" Matthieu de Baynast remembers. So I told him my story, I kind of romanticized my career in Africa. This caught his attention. At the end of the interview, he shook my

hand and said, "You are part of the squad, as the boss of international development". This was a quick decision, taken on instinct as always.

At the time, the new international director did not have any activities outside of France. Today, twelve years later, the group is present in 33 countries and targets 40 in the short term, and Matthieu de Baynast has been appointed CEO. Franck Julien is always thinking of the next shot. He wants to incorporate artificial intelligence in his business, and has just created a joint company with a specialist, Getronics. As he prepares his children to become good shareholders, there is no question of going onto the stock market. Even at 125,000 people, Atalian must remain a family affair.