

Alfredo Sarich

Pioneering the Electronic Trade Data Interchange (EDI) and e-Commerce Revolution

Mottos: For each innovator there are ten detractors

Pioneers have a habit of dying in the desert with a knife in their back

***Alfredo Sarich**, a native Italian and a successful visionary serial entrepreneur, received his Bsc (Hons) degree in Computer Science at Portsmouth university (UK) in the early 1970s. After a brief period of employment with Texas Instruments and Coopers & Lybrand (at the time one of the big six accounting firms) he joined, early 1978, the European Commission (EC) Information Technology Task Force (ITTF) where he was tasked with the development of cooperative, cross-European, IT-based projects in end-user industrial sectors. In 1979, once formally agreed by the European Council of Ministers of the European Communities (EC), his part of the programme was budgeted at some 3 million ECUs (now Euros). Sarich promoted foundational projects that spanned EC Member States' External Trade Departments (ETDs), Chambers of Commerce (COCs), Customs, Ports, Shipping, Transport, and others, and that led, in due course, to the emergence of Electronic (trade) Data Interchange (EDI) and Electronic Commerce.*

Anticipating the transition that was soon to change the paradigm of national and cross-border electronic data transfers, and within his institutional brief, he stimulated the launch, amongst others, of two critical bodies: **EVHA** (European Ports Data processing association) and **EASI** (European Association of Shipping Informatics). This work brought together the leading European ports and largest EU shipping operators into first-ever co-operative IT-based pilot projects. Up to that moment, although forms of electronic data exchange existed, communication between heterogeneous computer platforms was not available or demonstrated. The results of the projects were presented four years later, October 1983 – and under the auspices of the European Commission - at an international conference “**Sea Technology Europe**”. Key speakers were **Etienne Davignon**, Vice-President of the EC, **Michel Carpentier**, Director-General of the ITTF, **Robert Vleugels**, Managing Director of the port of Antwerp and **Alfredo Sarich**.

The meeting discussed foundational approaches, based on the European Community's industrial policy pillars and the visionary end-user pilot projects that had tested and confirmed the feasibility of the complex exchange of electronic trade data between national and international industrial and commercial actors. Ample evidence of substantial economies of scale deriving from electronic data transfers between disparate computer systems at national and international level had emerged. (Links, Photos).

The meeting agreed to progress by reaching out to the **United Nations Economic Commission for Europe** (UN/ECE) (links to UN/ECE*) and bring together national codes through the adoption of a common trade data interchange standard. The initial version of the new standard was based upon the UK **SITPRO** code (*link to SITPRO). Main targets in commercial and industrial sectors (initially in transport, automotive, chemical, construction, shipping, insurance and re-insurance) were identified. This work resulted in the formulation of notable groupings such as **ODETTE** (automotive), **CEFIC** (chemicals), **EDIFICE** (construction) and others. Engagements and direct (likely) financial benefits were discussed, on 31st August 1984, by Sarich at a European Commission's public press briefing where he famously stated that the adoption of a common standard would lead to savings of an average of 500 ECUs (now Euros) per manufactured vehicle.

(<https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg> : Common Links, Business Times, Singapore 05 September 1984, E-LIS repository <https://eprints.rclis.org> Proyectos EDI y Normalization).

Electronic Trade Data E Interchange (now **EDI**) and progress on the international EDIFACT standard resulted from this early industrial and commercial co-operative work.

By the end of 1984 it had become evident to Sarich that EDI would eventually encompass most industrial and commercial partners operating in the trading chain and that this would eventually drive to an almost paperless society. He decided to kick start the process investing in the launch of the first-ever international conference on commerce and trade: **Computer Aided Trade**.

Compat 85 was run in **London** by Business Briefings on behalf of **Euromatica SA**, Sarich's newly formed company, on 16/17 April 1985 (*link + press articles). The symposium brought together hundreds of high ranking directors, managers and trade specialists the world over. In his opening speech Sarich gave, in five well-known and humorous transparencies the first-ever, fully comprehensive vision, of what was going to happen in the following hundred years (*link to **transparencies 1-5 in WIKIMEDIA** and website + photo) amply anticipating and catapulting the technology into what is now better known as **Electronic Commerce**.

Compat 85 was the first of a series of annual international conferences It was followed by Paris 1986 (*link), The Hague 1988 (*link) , Munich 1989 (this last one under the management of Blenheim Plc UK (*link)). The Compat series of conferences were flanked by national and international events. This ensured early diffusion of Electronic commerce concept and in several languages (*link to Edi Italia 1987,etc.).

Early 1986, Sarich published the **first-ever** “Businessman's Guide to Electronic Trade Data Interchange and Paperless Trade”. This breakthrough guide – and in its second version published both in English and Italian (*link,) - was widely distributed worldwide. The work has been the launch-pad for international EDI and future e-commerce and it opened up the Pandora's box to scores of follow-on specialized books and reports. Sarich lectured , in this period, hundreds of IT specialists from technology leaders in the field (IBM, Honeywell, ICL and others (*link).

Concurrently, the European Commission began developing a programme of financial support to progress trade data interchange internationally. Named **TEDIS** (Trade Electronic Data Interchange Systems), this programme launched in 1987 and primarily served to progress work identified by associations such as ODETTE and private and institutional actors.

To strengthen the drive Sarich created, January 1988, the first-ever international association (Brussels' based **IDEA** - International Data Exchange Association -) of which he was elected Secretary General. From the same date IDEA was invited by the UN/ECE to attend, as a non-governmental body, and contribute to all meetings of the emerging **EDIFACT** standard <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/157778>, https://unece.org/DAM/cefact/recommendations/rec07/rec07_1988_inf108.pdf).

Subsequent years were devoted to introducing the benefits and concepts of **cross-national and cross-border** electronic trading exchanges to European institutions, including the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee (aei.pitt.edu/41686/1/AS5837.pdf ,

protection-1989/) and more, through events and information **workshops** (*link press reviews, brochures).

Sarich sold, in 1989, Euromatica SA (Belgium) to Blenheim Plc (United Kingdom) (*link). This was the world's first-ever sale of an emerging electronic commerce operation to a public company. At this junction he created a new company, XCOMS SA.

Whilst, by 1989, electronic data interchanges had moved into the administration, business and consumer domains one more step was necessary to ensure widespread and rapid penetration. The advent of the www, a genial move by Tim Berners-Lee when working at CERN (CERN was a member of IDEA) filled the gap.

In 1997 - and much **before** the term became a commodity - Sarich promoted the launch of the **Brussels' based** first-ever **Electronic Commerce** association (ECE for **Electronic Commerce Europe**) (*link) of which he was elected vice-President. He held, in parallel, directorship responsibilities in what was then known as the **European Electronic Messaging Association** (EEMA). EEMA merged with **IDEA** in 1992.

IDEA, ECE and EEMA received membership from most of the known software and communication vendors, trade bodies and national and international organisations involved in the early development of EDI and Electronic Commerce worldwide notably, for IDEA and ECE: Swift. CERN and the EAN. EDI and **Blockchain Technology** now advance in parallel, whilst SWIFT can be considered a competitor to **Bitcoin** in the trading chain. ((*link <https://www.ibm.com/think/topics/blockchain-vs-edi> +*[techcentrale.ie](https://www.techcentrale.ie), <https://www.bitpace.com> › blog › [bitcoin-vs-swift-which-is-a-better-option-for-your-business](https://www.bitpace.com/blog/bitcoin-vs-swift-which-is-a-better-option-for-your-business))
