

Media release

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Empa invites business leaders to an exchange of ideas

Refreshing new ideas at the Technology & Innovation Forum

The second event in the Empa Technology and Innovation Forum (ETIF) series offered the opportunity for a refreshing exchange of ideas among the leading figures in the Swiss mechanical and electrical engineering industries. The presentations and discussions, which took place under the by-line “Sustainability and Innovation”, were organized by jointly Empa, the industrial association Swissmem and the financial publication “Wirtschaftsmagazin”. The highlight of the event was the business history of «Karl’s kühne Gassenschau», a beloved, alternative Swiss outdoor theatre spectacle.

The second ETIF, following on the heels of the initial event in April, was once again dedicated to bringing together business leaders and company directors from national and international companies, both among themselves and with Empa scientists. During the presentations and at the subsequent dinner table brainstorming sessions, participants debated the question of what exactly the terms “Sustainability and Innovation” might mean in the context of everyday business life, and what risks they might conceal.

Innovation sometimes falls on its face

After introductory words by Gabriele Dobenecker, Head of Empa Marketing, and Hans Hess, Swissmem President, Manuela Stier, the publisher of the *Wirtschaftsmagazin*, explained to the audience how important the storytelling aspect is in terms of anchoring the sustainability strategy of a company in the public perception. “Through telling stories relating to sustainability we can involve those around us and encourage them to form their own opinions”, said Stier. This does not mean simply recounting the success stories, either – real stories also deal with problems and conflicts, though many business histories gloss over such matters. “That makes them unbelievable and boring,” the communications professional warned the audience. Fortunately, as far as the following presentations were concerned, her doubts were absolutely unfounded, as many of the speakers related stories of innovations that went wrong and crash-landed!

Resistance from the experts

Balz Halter, the proprietor of the Halter Group, introduced the audience to his vision of energy management in future dwellings. His dream is to link up all the devices in a household using electronic chips which

exchange signals via the mains power network. Unfortunately, the attitude of the building industry to these innovative ideas was not just "sceptical, but downright innovation-resistant!" The problem was not with the construction engineers themselves, but with the planners and consultants, who could only be won over at the cost of immense effort. Halter sees particular opportunities in simple, efficient solutions. "We shouldn't try to make small gains at enormous cost," was his advice. Rather keep costs down, he said, even if this sometimes means removing technology from a building.

How to invent a house façade

Hans Ruedi Schweizer heads the Schweizer Metallbau AG, a metal construction company which has been making installation kits for solar panels for 36 years. "We found ourselves welcomed with open arms when we made the decision not to fit solar panels on to, but in place of, roof tiles," was how he described the key, innovative idea behind the company's products. It is, however, essential that such a degree of success be underpinned by a sustainable strategy: the cash flow is ploughed back to ensure long-term maintenance of value and to further business development, as well as being passed on in the form of employee bonuses. Schweizer Metallbau develops new products according to a standardized procedure: idea, pilot project, project definition, design, prototype, pilot series, then finally manufacturing series.

Recycling furniture at the highest (price) level

Michael Girsberger, CEO of Girsberger Holding AG, explained to the audience how to keep one step ahead of low-price rivals in the fiercely competitive furniture industry. The company has intentionally established a broad base on which to operate, supplying its woodworking partners with the necessary wood and maintaining an exclusive design line. It also runs a «Service & Remanufacturing» department, where used furniture is rejuvenated - the fastest growing sector in the industry. "We are seeing a real boom in this area", said Girsberger. "Renovate instead of replacing, refurbishment instead of disposal – this has become the watchword of many of our clients." A market niche has been created which has found its place alongside Ikea and the like.

«A product that no-one really wants»

Lukas Braunschweiler, CEO of Sonova Holding AG, introduced his company with the following, slightly unusual description. "We develop hearing aids – products that no one wants!" To stay ahead long term in this market, which (from the technological point of view) is developing extremely rapidly, calls for a strategy honed to perfection – a strategy based on five principles, which Braunschweiler described individually. One of these is to accept change. Marketing models in the field of hearing instruments are changing at a dramatic rate, even going as far as internet sales. To steer Sonova in that direction gradually would have meant

missing the boat, so the senior management of the company simply made a snap decision to buy out the internet marketing leader in the USA, Hearing Planet.

Leaps in technology are absolutely essential too, but sometimes they do not fit easily into a company's own culture. A hearing aid, designed in California, has been developed which is as small as a grain of rice and which fits into the auditory canal of the wearer – complete with a battery which lasts for two months. "We could have done it too, but we didn't", says Braunschweiler self critically. In the end, Sonova bought up this firm as well and integrated it into the group. Courage and stamina are essential, the Sonova CEO said, closing his presentation with a quote by IBM founder Thomas Watson: "If you want to increase your success, double your failure rate."

Playing on the audience's anxieties – a recipe for success!

To wrap up the event, an unusual entrepreneur took the stage – a "businessman" who's product portfolio overshadowed all those previously discussed: Ernesto Graf, the leader of the theatrical and acrobatic troupe *Karl's kühne Gassenschau* ("Karl's Rampaging Roadshow" or something similar). This daring company (in the very literal sense of the word!) has been in existence since 1984, since when it has undergone several metamorphoses. These have led to increasingly daring stunts supported by even more daring financial constructions. "We just enjoy staging juvenile pranks, doing silly things that everyone else gave up at the age of eighteen!" say Graf, who completed a degree in mathematics before embarking on a career as an acrobat. *Karl's kühne Gassenschau* "plays on anxieties – our own, and those of our audience;" explained the theatre professional. This, it seems, is the key to entrepreneurial success.

The ETIF lecture series will be continued next year.

Further information

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Karl's kühne Gassenschau: A scene from «The Quarry».



Karl's kühne Gassenschau: A scene from «The Building Site».



Empa Director Gian Luca Bona (2nd from the right) in discussion with guests at the ETIF



ETIF presenters on stage. On the right, striking an acrobatic pose, is Ernesto Graf of Karl's kühne Gassenschau.

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