



Sabine Schmelzer: a passion for enhancing women's networks and careers

The Confidence of a Woman

What alumni associations, the Kiwanis, Rotary and the Lions Club are in the men's world, the International Federation of Business & Professional Women is for the other half of humankind. BPW Switzerland has recently elected Sabine Schmelzer to head the organization. Andrea Pillay met her for coffee at the Zurich train station.

It is not easy to find an hour or so to chat with Sabine Schmelzer these days. The newly elected president of BPW Switzerland and self-employed workshop facilitator, leadership trainer and change management expert is very much in demand. “Yes, I am very busy and am continuously getting involved in new projects,” she says over a latte macchiato in the lounge on the first floor of the main station in Zurich.

We had finally found a timeslot for a face-to-face talk between business

lunches and previous engagements. Busy people meet in busy places: we were both catching trains to different parts of the country.

Freedom of expression

Sabine Schmelzer has just started a follow-up based on the results of a world café at the annual national BPW conference last autumn. “It focuses on the two issues that proved most predominant:

solidarity amongst women and 'just do it' – a slogan for courage.” And she does just that. Sabine Schmelzer is originally German and now lives and works in Sisseln in the canton of Aargau. Her new role as president of BPW Switzerland will leave her with even less time so she may have to put some of her training and consulting activities into the hands of capable colleagues. Yet she sees her presidency as a great opportunity: “I am the first German president of BPW in Switzerland and it is a big

chance for me to move and even change a few things.” For a start, she would like to increase its promotional efforts. “If we were more involved in activities like the recent Equal Pay Day in Germany, we could create more awareness for specific issues of women in business and support, mentor and encourage more professional women.” She is also

during her 27 years of professional life. She started as an assistant in sales and then moved into IT project management, developing the first sales information system for her company at the time. After some years with an IT consultancy, she went back into sales and became a corporate sales manager, responsible for the German, Swiss and

allows an audience to follow the process and its results immediately. These often huge mind maps can then be distributed, transferred to other programs and further processed. She usually cooperates with other facilitators, but also moderates workshops herself, and consults companies in restructuring, change and team building processes.

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thinking of becoming more engaged in current topics: “In the political arena for example, like our recent support of a campaign for Ms. Widmer-Schlumpf. We joined with the Alliance F and published an advertisement. If we realize everything currently in our pipeline, I see an interesting and challenging time ahead of me.”

The 46-year-old is a real “jane-of-all-trades” herself, as it were, having changed her career path several times

Austrian markets until she started her own business and consultancy firm in Germany. She then took a position as key account manager for Mindjet, which inspired her to develop a service called live-mapping. “Mind maps are a great tool for structuring and organizing tasks, ideas and projects. As I am very quick in creating mind maps electronically, I can map the results of discussions, workshops, world cafés or working sessions and project them onto the wall.” This

A professional heart

Sabine Schmelzer is very passionate about her work. She is highly committed to BPW and profoundly enjoys supporting other women. “My leadership trainings encourage them and provide skills that they need in order to pursue their careers successfully.” BPW’s mentoring programs enable supportive matches of like-minded and experienced women with newcomers, and the members have a broad global network and a wealth of potential relationships at their disposal. In fact, she was a member of BPW in Germany, which gave her an initial start when she moved to Switzerland. “I approached some BPW members in Basel and joined their club when I arrived – I was immediately well connected.” Sabine Schmelzer is convinced that the association helps women to develop further, particularly in areas where opportunities are scarce and they need a sound network. “We connect women of all ages and professions,” she says. The youngest members are in their early twenties and the oldest currently is over 90 years old. Amongst them are women who work in banks, insurances and energy companies, and there are many entrepreneurs. Some have already started their business, others are planning to kick off soon. “We

Birth of a network

Early last century, Lena Madelin Phillips became the first woman to graduate with honors from the University of Kentucky College of Law. She was admitted to the bar in the same year and began practicing law, first in her hometown. A few years later, in New York City, she came face to face with the injustice, despair and social ills that had never seen in her sheltered youth. She quickly sensed what power could be generated by a national movement of women who had a business or a profession. “If we have faith, vision and courage, accomplishment must come,” was her mission statement in some ways when she founded BPW in the US. In the late 1920s, while president of the American National Federation, she crossed the Atlantic leading goodwill tours and seeking like-minded European businesswomen to form an international organization. In 1930, her dream came true with the founding of the International Federation of Business & Professional Women in Geneva. Today, the association has grown to be one of the most influential international associations of business and professional women, dedicated to give support, provide a network, foster individual development and leadership trainings to maintain reputed mentoring programs. The federation accounts for affiliates in 80 countries on five continents and its members include influential women leaders, entrepreneurs, business owners, executives, professionals and young career starters.

really accommodate a mixture of all professions, all experiences and all ages. If they sign up for our programs, they usually want to learn new things and develop further.” Younger women are especially eager to boost their careers and improve their soft skills. “They often find that during their studies they were educated and trained in a particular subject but lack soft skills like how to present them-selves, negotiate and speak or expose themselves publicly.”

According to Schmelzer, these skills are equally important for men and women in business life, “but women are often taught and socialized to be quiet, kind and helpful, rather than powerful, demanding and outstanding. They clearly have the talents and abilities to be just as professional and exceptional as men but they sometimes need a little encouragement. They change and broaden their self-perception and strengthen their

confidence. It often takes as little as that to get them going.”

Many resources

Changing, moving and developing things is the thread that runs through her private and professional life. It all gives her a broad experience and perspective. “As an external consultant, I have a different point of view on many things. I dare asking difficult, uncomfortable and unexpected questions. From the outside it is often easier to step into the employee’s shoes and help the management see and consider their concerns.”

When asked about potential pitfalls in Switzerland and her lessons learned, she quickly replied: “I really like Switzerland and am not inclined to move back. I had to learn to slow down a bit and to be more patient and diplomatic.

The Swiss like to think carefully and brood and dwell upon things before fully adopting new ideas. Today, I hold my reigns a little longer before dashing into new projects. The Swiss also are a bit more distant. I understand that some foreigners, mainly expat women that I meet in business or privately, find it sometimes difficult to get in touch with Swiss people. I think an English magazine like *business guide* can provide an excellent platform and forum to integrate these people.”

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Andrea Pillay



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