

„MARGIN PRESSURE AFFECTS EVERY SEGMENT“

Andrea Wucher has been at the helm of the Weiss + Appetito Group since 1 June 2016. In this interview, the newcomer reveals how she wants to master the challenges of the building industry.

You are the first woman ever to lead the Weiss + Appetito Group, established in 1923, and have held the position since 1 June 2016 after joining as a non-industry specialist. What impression of the building industry have you gained since taking over?

Andrea Wucher: The building industry offers everything an entrepreneur could wish for: interesting and ambitious projects, a lot of potential for new ideas, technologies and business models. The market is fiercely contested, with the unfortunate result that the trust relationship between building owner and contractor is not always as good as it could be. It is therefore important to pay more attention to constructive collaboration on site as it would make construction work in Switzerland more efficient and therefore more cost-effective.

Profit margins are often considered to be a significant problem in the building industry. How do you see it?

Wucher: Margin pressure affects every segment. However, simply moaning about it is not the right way of tackling the problem in my opinion. Margin pressure is also an incentive and motivation to seek out new solutions and develop.

How do you want to tackle the problem?

Wucher: We as a group are attempting to make more use of the synergies between divisions, to become more efficient and optimise our processes. All the energy we waste internally with complicated processes and unclear inter-

faces is consequently unavailable for our work in the marketplace. We want to change that. To be lean, flexible and efficient on the inside and reliable, innovative and customer-oriented on the outside – that is our goal.

„Being better is always a topical subject“

You mentioned processes. BIM has to do with processes – does that make it a topic for you?

Wucher: We are observing and following the development of BIM in Switzerland. The BIM principle, however, is not new to the working world. An approach like the one adopted by BIM that stretches from planning to utilisation is already a matter of course in other segments such as ICT.

Many building companies have reservations when it comes to BIM. Is that something you can understand?

Wucher: BIM will no doubt happen and become a part of our daily work. Finding the right moment in time for starting with BIM is decisive. If you start too early, you lose too much time and money; if you start too late, you lose out to the competition.

The industry is leading in process optimisation – take Lean Management, for example.

Is that something of interest to the construction segment? In logistics, for instance,

or on-site organisation?

Wucher: At the end of the day, Lean Management is nothing other than having the right material and the right employee in the right place at the right time. What is decisive here is good, solid planning and committed employees who think on their feet, who are flexible and at times creative. All of this is already a part of our everyday work.

Is the Kaizen method of interest in this regard, analogous to Japanese companies?

Wucher: Being better is always a topical subject. That is why every day starts with the thought: „What can I do today to make us more successful tomorrow?“ This has less to do with methods and philosophies and more with an intrinsic attitude towards one's work and a corresponding corporate culture.

Andrea Wucher:

Andrea Wucher did not begin her career in the building industry. She started as an apprentice in the aviation industry, gained a degree in business informatics and then an Executive MBA in Innovation Management. Prior to taking on her current position at Weiss + Appetito, she was employed by Energie Service Biel/Bienne, where she headed the Marketing and Sales Division as a member of management. Daniel Kramer, Chairman of the Board at Weiss + Appetito, named her as the candidate of choice.

Does this take place with the inclusion of employees?

Wucher: Of course. Corporate culture is shaped by each individual in the company. It is not something you can prescribe. You can only lead through example.

To stay with processes: it is easier to improve processes in the area of pre-fabrication. Do you think pre-fabrication will play a greater role in construction companies in the future?

Wucher: Pre-fabrication will definitely gain importance in certain areas. Time is money to building owners, too. Pre-fabrication allows us to reduce the building time or number of interruptions to operations on site and therefore hand over the building to its owner at an earlier date. Building owners earn money through a shorter period of construction and intervention. Thus, pre-fabrication contributes towards reducing the building costs for the building owner.

When talk turns to cutting costs, attempts are often made to reduce the number of hours worked by employees, firstly through maintaining efficient processes as mentioned earlier, but also through automation. Is the latter a topic of interest to you?

Wucher: Automation will not stop short of the building industry. It will be interesting to see which areas will first be affected by automation in the Swiss building industry, i.e. on the construction site.

What does the construction site of the future look like?

Wucher: I hope it will be planned with more forethought and better coordinated than it is today. Interfaces will be clarified and adjusted in advance to make the construction process more efficient and therefore more cost-effective. Building in Switzerland is simply too expensive and inefficient due to the partially chaotic conditions on construction sites.



Andrea Wucher became CEO of the Weiss + Appetito Group in June 2016. Prior to her appointment, she was employed by energy provider Energies Service Biel/Bienne. Photo: zvg

Your background is marketing. Do you think the market needs to catch up?

Wucher: The construction segment seems to struggle with the subject of marketing and a customer's view of its own performance. We often focus on the technical solution, on our world of standards and engineering performance instead of putting the customer and his needs and wants at the centre of our attention.

„Automation will not stop short of the building industry“

Weiss + Appetito has its very own model: shares are held by the management crew; employees also hold shares in the company. What advantages and disadvantages are there?

Wucher: Our share model gives us stability and supports the long-term considerations and actions of the management team and board. The money that we invest and spend is always our own money. It is also motivating

that every franc the company earns is money that belongs to the employees. Corporate culture is different depending on whether you are simply an employee of the company or also a co-owner. I do not see any disadvantages.

Innovation management is one of your strengths. How do you intend to initiate it within the company?

Wucher: Innovation begins with the right questions. We ask too few questions and certainly do not question our own actions as often as we should. Innovation only works if the company provides sufficient space for new ideas and enables things to be tried out. My job is to create this space and initiate the right questions.

How will you get the employees on board? Many changes can at first make the workforce uncertain.

Wucher: Many things will stay the same simply because they are good. We should never forget that and I continuously emphasise the constants in the process. It keeps us all grounded. After all, we are ultimately dealing with people. They have been shaped by their experiences and have different incentives for their behaviour. Most people become enthusiastic about things that are new when they recognise and understand the benefits.

Not many women work in the construction segment. Should that change?

Wucher: Mixed gender teams are often more successful and work better together than all-female or all-male teams. That would certainly speak in favour of more women. However, I do not think that a fixed quota of women is the right instrument for getting more women into the industry. I prefer to convince others through performance and personality and, in doing so, try to be an example to others.

Interview: Susanna Vanek