“Robots cannot take the place of human interactions”
Digital transformation is triggering tectonic shifts in business and society. This is a major challenge to the zeitgeist. Businesses need to adapt how they think and realign themselves. The working world is undergoing changes and demanding new collaborative approaches. Dr. Marianne Janik, CEO of Microsoft Switzerland, and Stefan Pfister, CEO of KPMG Switzerland, discuss future challenges facing Switzerland as a business location.

Can Arikan: How do you, yourself, see Switzerland positioned as a business location?

Marianne Janik: Switzerland has an extremely strong brand essence made up of three components: Innovation plays a huge part in it, with the second component being security, and education or the Swiss education system forming the third component. Yet the big question is how we can make better use of existing potential. I’d like to launch a dialog about how the country of Switzerland could leverage digital technology for even greater achievements.

And as a business consultant, where do you think Switzerland is currently positioned as a business location?

Stefan Pfister: We’re all familiar with the country rankings and I’m sure we’re among the top-ranked locations in all of them. But that’s a retrospective view, if you ask me. I’m more concerned about what we see when we look toward the future. We can’t afford to recklessly let our strengths and unique characteristics just slip away.
Are we hearing a bit of skepticism or do you feel confident?

Marianne Janik The fact that the ingredients in Switzerland’s brand essence are so strong makes me feel extremely confident.

Stefan Pfister Confidence is definitely the right word. Because the right topics are up for discussion. The question is: How quickly can we get new solutions on the ground? Plus, the academic situation isn’t quite where it should be to meet the needs of businesses. Training opportunities have to be brought up to speed, especially in the digital realm. This is an area where we’ve fallen behind English-speaking countries.

Marianne Janik The Lehrplan 21 curriculum project definitely lays a solid foundation for this. Then there’s the question of retraining and further education. This discussion is still being conducted with a great deal of restraint in this country.

KPMG and Microsoft have set themselves the goal of lending companies a hand in their efforts to successfully shape their own futures. Do you see this responsibility as a burden?

Stefan Pfister Not at all, to me it’s a pleasure, an incentive and, last but not least, an obligation. We consider ourselves an extension of the academic world. Young people come to us expecting to continue following a steep learning curve. They can also choose to switch over to the business side of things and gather more experience there. It is vital to our survival to remain at the forefront of efforts to develop future scenarios for our country.

Marianne Janik We, too, consider it an obligation that we are only too happy to meet. We’ve been in Switzerland for thirty years now. We have a network of 4,500 partners, many of which are SMEs. It’s our mission to make new technologies accessible to both businesses and individuals and to help them use these technologies. In terms of culture, Switzerland has one major strength: Its consensus-building process. This willingness to cooperate is a huge advantage in the digital economy. We’ve defined “Three Cs” that will help us and our clients on the path toward digitalization: Creativity, collaboration and consensus. Nowhere are the conditions better for this than in Switzerland.

Do you think digitalization will create more jobs in Switzerland or eliminate them?

Marianne Janik Human beings have a hard time predicting the future. But if we look at the situation on the job market and see more vacancies than even a large-scale reduction in jobs could eliminate in the near future, my outlook is not very gloomy at all.

Stefan Pfister Not everybody will be able to keep pace with the requirements of higher-level job profiles. Since automation will eliminate many simpler tasks, we will have to very consciously focus on creating jobs for people who aren’t as well trained.

Marianne Janik This touches on the discussion surrounding a universal basic income. Switzerland is one of the pioneers on the topic. I think it’s worth discussing things like this. What I mean by that is that we approach these topics maturely and with an open mind, that we have confidence in our ability to shape our own future rather than simply letting ourselves be impacted by it. Digitalization isn’t a virus, it isn’t a sickness.

Major global groups and corporations – like Microsoft and KPMG – anticipate the future and are shaping this transformation in both the business world and society. They create a fait accompli.

Marianne Janik Microsoft doesn’t just create a fait accompli. We try to do this in such a way that it’s also compatible with our ethical principles. We wouldn’t invest in technologies that we think will be harmful to people at the end of the day. As a company, we are highly aware of our role in this. We take responsibility for our actions through self-regulation.

Stefan Pfister We operate in ecosystems and environments that enable us to develop our innovative strength and products to the best of our ability for the benefit of mankind. At the same time, pioneering companies like Microsoft are creating new technological realities which, in turn, have to be anticipated by the political system. Plus, we need to navigate the conflicting values of different cultures and ethnicities. That means that opinions differ as to what the word “ethical” actually implies.

Marianne Janik At the end of the day, we have to remember that people are responsible for their own actions, not technology.

Where do you see the boundaries of digitalization? Are there any areas of life that won’t be affected by technology?

Marianne Janik Our basic assumption is that everything that can be digitalized, will indeed be digitalized in some way. But what’s more important is for us to consider how that digitalization will actually benefit us. And that brings us back to the concept of mature, judicious individuals and judicious companies.
Do either the demands of companies or consumers exceed our technological capabilities? Are their expectations greater than what technology can currently offer?

Marianne Janik That definitely holds true with respect to artificial intelligence. R&D has been working on this for some time already, but results rarely live up to the expectations. One situation we see time and again is that companies with very little digital expertise in upper management have exaggerated expectations of technology.

Stefan Pfister I’m sure there are some areas of life where a large portion of the population is already unable to cope with the capabilities offered by our modern technology.

Yet at the same time, we also see individual fields like medicine, where mankind has a perpetual desire for technology to step in and offer solutions at a much faster pace.

Will a critical mass fall by the wayside in the future?

Marianne Janik I think this calls for a greater level of differentiation. On the one hand, there are, quite simply, tasks that will be impossible to automate in the foreseeable future. Nursing and teaching are two professions that come to mind. But robots won’t be able to take the place of human interactions anytime in the near future, if ever.

Stefan Pfister In fact, the need for human interaction might even increase. And I’m glad we still need it. Digitalization has its limits in that respect.

Marianne Janik As a society, we have to take time to emotionally adapt to this age. But to do that, we first have to understand what’s happening. You can’t simply rely on myths. After all, technological advances don’t come as a surprise. They’re the product of decades of research.
But digitalization will change the way we work. What will the workplace of the future look like?

**Marianne Janik** An excellent question. We, too, started experimenting on ourselves many years ago. People of more than forty nationalities, spread across multiple generations, work at Microsoft in Switzerland. We tried to create the most flexible working environment possible. That means a working environment based on trust that incorporates management tools. We also make it possible for our employees to run their own business on the side.

**Stefan Pfister** That’s fascinating. Microsoft is already extremely agile in that regard. Our business is subject to certain limits by nature – many driven purely by regulations. I’m sure, though, that workplace flexibility will shape the future.

**But individual emancipation from a fixed workplace doesn’t mean that companies will completely eliminate their local presence?**

**Marianne Janik** No, definitely not. We have to create meeting places within the company. We need rooms where external partners, clients and our staff have a chance to work together. Innovation, inspiration and motivation often happen quite fortuitously.

**Stefan Pfister** This is precisely the philosophy we’re planning to introduce when we open our new headquarters in Zurich. In other words, we’re going to create more meeting places and new types of workplaces – for our clients and partners too.

**Marianne Janik** One idea we’re considering are pop-up stores. Those could be Microsoft stores somewhere in the world that we can also use as workplaces for our employees or as meeting rooms or event venues for our clients.

**Stefan Pfister** Major corporations are increasingly moving into office spaces along the outskirts of large cities, giving rise to a need for meeting places and rooms in the city center as a result. We use our meeting center in London, for example, to meet with...
clients, have a bite to eat before or after meetings or enjoy a cup of coffee in the lounge. We’ll be seeing a lot more of these business/social room hybrids in the future.

Marianne Janik Fantastic, that’s the future. We have meeting rooms like that in Berlin: half office, half café. And a handful of start-ups right in the middle that interact with our employees and exchange ideas with them. There’s a lot of creativity happening there.

When we look at agile companies like Microsoft and KPMG, is culture the core element when creating an identity?

Stefan Pfister Yes, absolutely.

Marianne Janik Yes. But it’s not just about identity, it’s also the culture of lifelong learning, open-mindedness and risk-taking that makes these innovations even possible.

Stefan Pfister At KPMG, our culture not only lends us our identity but also engenders trust. Our clients’ trust in us, our trust in ourselves, our trust in what we deliver and what we create. That’s essential.

How important are ecosystems in this context? Will companies be able to make it on their own in the future?

Marianne Janik If you ask me, the answer to that question is an unequivocal no. Because we’re living in a platform economy. To become a relevant platform player, you have to be open on all sides, even toward your competitors. After all, clients want to reap the benefits of a platform, which is not the case if they keep hitting barriers.

Stefan Pfister We can’t keep doing everything on our own. We need the platform mindset and partnerships.

Everybody has their own core area of expertise and these need to be bundled, which is more exciting anyway.

Building trust takes time. How can you create trust within an ecosystem in a faster-paced environment where companies’ agility is on the rise?

Stefan Pfister That’s true, trust takes time. But our notion of time is also changing. Since the environment is becoming faster-paced, trust will have to be built more quickly as well. But it can also be broken even more quickly.

As a partner in a strategic partnership or alliance, what do you expect to receive in return?

Marianne Janik In the end, it’s less about what we expect to receive in return. Looking at what I’m experiencing right now with respect to partnerships, including those between our companies, I think it’s more about working together to offer a client significantly higher added value.

Stefan Pfister Reliability and innovative strength are the key things I expect of a partnership. That forms the basis of a successful platform.

Marianne Janik Yes, and the values should match. Plus, it’s always about the client and not about how I can benefit from the partnership.

If the focus is suddenly on the client in today’s age of transformation, then what was the previous business model?

Stefan Pfister The focus has always been on the client – now we’re just re-emphasizing that focus. In this radically changing environment, many companies had to focus on themselves for a while and clients might not have been their top priority from time to time. That’s fatal, of course. We have to explicitly point out again that, ultimately, everything must benefit the client.

Marianne Janik I also think that clients are changing. As a provider of technology, that means we have to change how we approach our contacts more frequently than in the past. That’s why partnerships offer a suitable model for gaining an enhanced understanding of our clients’ needs and addressing their specific requirements.

How should companies be dealing with digitalization and this fast-paced environment?

Stefan Pfister With curiosity, agility and enthusiasm. Everything else will follow automatically.

Marianne Janik With a positive image of mature individuals. That’s the most important thing, if you ask me.

If we look into your future, when will you be able to say with a clear conscience: I’ve made my contribution to our changing future, I’ve left my footprint?

Marianne Janik My biggest sense of pleasure comes from seeing things that we’ve built up, that involved a huge personal commitment, are still in place and still evolving.

Stefan Pfister I’d like to have created a foundation that will provide a stable environment where the future generation can continue to develop successfully. That’s actually my biggest aspiration.