

Speed is of the essence

The "tempo virus" heats up the pace

Do you remember how you used to communicate before you had a mobile phone? The fact is, life in those days had to be organized very differently. You were tied to appointments or places from which contacts could be made. A return to those old and quieter times is inconceivable today and would be hard to get used to.

The "tempo virus" has infected modern society and now pervades the entire economy. Who is prepared to wait today until a contact person can be reached? In an increasingly globalized economy and society, the pace of communication, production and decision-making has increased at a fantastic rate. Anyone who does not keep up is bound to disappear from the market.

Some caught short; some are with it

The age of peace and quiet is long gone. In the emerging countries of Asia, millions of people are ready to spring in to fill the gap if production conditions in Switzerland become too stringent or a business is paralysed.

In the next 15 years, nearly 40% of world economic growth will come from China and India. According to experts, those two countries, together with the US, will dominate the world economy in the year 2020. Many of the

goods that we find in our department stores today already come from Asia. With the incredible pace of globalization of the economy, local and national policies and national markets are becoming increasingly irrelevant to international Swiss groups such as Nestlé and Novartis.

Large parts of the Swiss economy have been caught short by the pace of structural change and fail to understand the need to adapt their processes and decision-making lines to the faster pace of the economy in a manner required by the market. Companies tied to a specific site are the ones that have been unable to benefit from the faster pace of the economy unless their site itself was a speculative object. The result is that thousands of businesses failed to recognize the signs of the times in the 1990s and early 2000s, and believed that the world would continue on its previous comfortable path.

A good example is the SBB, the Swiss railways, which have come a cropper with the SBB Cargo goods transport concept. The company failed to understand how to provide a flexible answer to customers' delivery needs. Swissair failed to respond immediately to changing business conditions in a world where speed is of the essence.

With the confused activism of its hunter strategy and rigid internal structures that supposedly "model business" flew straight into a brick wall.

Other Swiss companies have acknowledged the signs of the times and acted accordingly. Service providers, management consultants and industry – which must increasingly adopt just-in-time production methods and adapt daily to changing needs – are the precursors of this trend.

Logistics – the tempo business par excellence – is one of the main drivers behind the accelerating pace of globalization. In this area, Switzerland is a leading player with Kühne & Nagel International, the world's foremost logistics group on the oceans, which, under Chairman Klaus Michael-Kühne, controls the distribution and transport of goods and containers all over the world from its headquarters at Schindellegi in Schwyz. The success story of this business goes to show that even a little country without a seaboard can still be a global player if it has far-sighted captains of industry.

Reaping the benefits

The increasing tempo of life today is not confined to the economy. Modern technology enables distances to be bridged ever faster. A destination »»»



The NEAT Lötschberg base tunnel – straight into the 21st century

that used to be a day's ride away on horseback can now be reached in a few minutes by modern means of transport.

Valais is benefiting from the acceleration of business in Switzerland. Under the Valais Cantonal Minister of the Economy Jean-Michel Cina – who is regarded as one of the pacemakers of our country – his canton has grown from a peripheral player to become an economic centre set in the heart of the Alps. Today, the Alpine valley is not just Switzerland's biggest chemical industry site but also the biggest supplier of hydraulic energy.

One of the drivers of economic growth in the Valais is the inauguration of the NEAT Lötschberg base tunnel, which catapulted the previously peripheral canton of Valais with its sunshine and assured snow, straight

into the 21st century. With the change of timetable in December 2007, the train journey from destinations in German-speaking Switzerland was cut by one hour. As a result, the Valais moved overnight to within commuting distance of Switzerland's urban centres. Not only tourism will benefit, but also the related service and industrial branches.

Urs Zenhäusern, the far-sighted director of Valais Tourism – who is the most successful Swiss tourism operator with his counterpart in St Moritz, Hanspeter Danuser – quickly recognized and exploited the great potential of the Valais brand on the Asian markets. Under his leadership, the Valais has become Switzerland's leading canton for tourism.

The challenges ahead

Whether we like it or not, the world has gotten smaller and so too has Switzerland. We live in an age of simultaneous action. The fact is that with this faster pace of the economy, competition for goods and services has become still more acute. We are facing permanent pressure to move ever faster if we wish at the very least to preserve our economic efficiency, our standard of living and our social attainments.

Here, the challenges are not just for the politicians, but also for teachers and educators. They are the ones laying the foundations today for future generations. «««

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