



60% VISION,
120% PASSION

INTERVIEW

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SANDRA TOBLER IS CEO AND CO-FOUNDER OF CYBERSECURITY SPECIALIST FUTURAE TECHNOLOGIES AG. SHE RECOGNISED THE POTENTIAL OF IT EARLY ON BUT BECAME A BUSINESSWOMAN PURELY BY CHANCE. SHE PARTIED WITH SILICON VALLEY ENTREPRENEURS AND WAS ONE OF THE PIONEERS OF THE SWISS FINTECH SCENE. SHE DOESN'T LET A VISUAL IMPAIRMENT GET IN HER WAY AS SHE MAINTAINS A KEEN SENSE OF BALANCE BETWEEN TECHNOLOGY AND HUMANITY.

Ms Tobler, how did you end up in IT?

I studied international relations in Geneva, focusing on business but with a minor in IT. I soon became convinced that innovative IT would be a competitive advantage in all areas of business one day.

Did anything make a particular impression on you?

I remember years ago reading a case study about an Indian village that bought a laptop that everyone could use. It meant that they could compare the prices they were charging for their goods with those elsewhere. I thought: "Wow! New technologies can really change lives!"

That was the age of the dotcom bubble.

It was. I'd finished uni and was temping at the WEF, where I got to hang out and be inspired by so many charismatic individuals from the tech scene. I went to parties with one

of the founders of Google and there was always the feeling in the air that the world was about to change. Shortly afterwards I joined IBM, where I spent six years immersing myself in all aspects of IT.

Where did your career go from there?

Later I looked after the internationalisation of businesses and the IT sector at Switzerland Global Enterprise. In 2013, I organised a trip for the Swiss fintech delegation to London. Things were moving faster there in terms of the interplay between financial innovation and financial service providers. It was a huge opportunity for Switzerland, too. From that point on my mission was to get behind this kind of progress for us. At first, I worked out of Switzerland, then later from San Francisco for the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

You met your co-founders in America.

I actually wanted to sign on with a tech firm that was operating where politics and strategy intersect. But start my own company? Never. A mutual friend introduced us, and we hit it off right away. We also had similar visions for IT security. We founded the ETH spinoff Futurae Technologies AG a short time later.

What was your IT security vision?

We all took the same view, that we had to re-think customer security entirely. We needed a whole new approach that was more agile and more progressive. Authentication standards are advancing all the time because there are more and more digital services. That said, not even the best security will work if its users don't apply it properly. Equally, if the user is smart enough they'll get around the most secure system there is.

Describe your launch in the world of start-ups.

At the beginning you've no customers and no name. We had a clear vision and a prototype but it was a long way from being a useable product. Bit by bit, we worked out exactly what we wanted to achieve, from the brand to the team to the investors. Doing that, we were very aware that our decisions would have lasting consequences. We are grateful that we were quickly able to gain customers who believed in us and we had support from Venturekick and F10 start-up schemes but it was mainly perseverance. Working hard and creating our own luck was what got us furthest.

What were the greatest challenges?

IT security can be a tricky business because you rely on the complete confidence of your customer. That's especially true of Switzerland because people are risk averse and tend

to be sceptical about new technologies. In the early stages you have to make so many fundamental decisions, all of which have a big effect on the whole team. It demands a huge amount of mental energy.

How would you describe working with Airlock?

It's so great to have a partner that embodies and lives similar values. Airlock shares our expectations where security and data privacy are concerned, focuses on the customer, and where the engineering is concerned believes as firmly as we do in Switzerland as a business location. Our cultures are the perfect fit. The balance between technology and humanity is key.

How have you found working from home?

The pandemic is a disaster. To be honest, though, working from home is relatively pleasant for me. I have a visual impairment, so my eyesight's only 60 per cent. Travelling and events are hard work and time-consuming, so I find it easier to be at home.

Thank you for being so open. You can't tell.

I have a very limited field of vision. If you hold something out to me I often won't see it. That's why I frequently ask for help with basic things, like getting up on to a dark stage to make a speech. I don't mind asking but others find it hard. The more I share my own story, the more I hear similar ones. Nothing inspires me more than talking to interesting people.

What should the entrepreneurs of the future know?

Passion is what fuels the business rollercoaster. It also helps to maintain your self-confidence. In over-cautious Switzerland, in particular, all too often you'll hear that something is a bad idea, it will never work, so don't bother. You have to rise above that and just do it. />

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