

FEATURING ANDREAS CAMINADA, LAURENCE ROCHAT, NINA RUGE

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Holistic Health

WIE WIR LERNEN,
UNS UND DIE (BUSINESS-)WELT
GANZHEITLICHER ZU SEHEN |

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SOMMERAUSGABE 2023



INVESTORS
TALK
BY DR. CAROLE
ACKERMANN

_Carole Ackermann interviews
Dominique Gruhl-Bégin, COO Swiss Venture Group

Your Network Is Your Net Worth – A True Story

Dominique Gruhl-Bégin is the COO of the Swiss Ventures Group. With more than 17 years of experience acquired across 3 continents and in 3 languages in areas ranging from start-up and innovation promotion, international trade, management consulting, negotiations and supply chain as well as in art curating, she brings a diverse skillset to the group. She holds a Masters in Economics (econometrics) from HEC Montréal as well as a Masters in Art Gallery and Museum Studies from University of Leeds and is responsible for the flawless execution of the operations of the group.

PHOTO: ALESSANDRO DELLA BELLA

Ladies Drive: Dominique, do you remember your first experience with entrepreneurship?

Dominique Gruhl-Bégin: I didn't have true entrepreneurship exposure when I was very young, but soon as I was legally allowed to work, I took on a multitude of different jobs from musical summer camp animator at age 14, event organiser in a gymnasium, receptionist, salesperson in a shoe store, information agent for Montreal Tourism and more. My first real entrepreneurial experience was in the Philippines when I was 24 years old. I didn't have a job, so I decided to create my own by selling, creating and running negotiation trainings for corporates, as I had done a lot of research and worked in this field during my studies at HEC Montreal. It was a fantastic experience.

You initially worked in roles in management consulting and the arts before innovation became your focus. What attracted you to this combination and does this knowledge still help you today?

I'm a true believer that innovation only works through the combination of different disciplines. Confronting diverse sets of ideas and allowing new ideas to disrupt one's own is what helps to think outside a given box. With arts, I'm fascinated by the way artists bring a new perspective to objects, people, life in general. I also admire the process of questioning the status quo and the chaos that leads to a creative output. The diversity in perspectives and the links between disciplines definitely helps me understand, appreciate and identify opportunities in innovative businesses today.

As Head of Start-up and Next Generation Innovators Division of Innosuisse, you led the transformation from CTI to Innosuisse. What motivated you to join a state organisation?

The type of organisation was at the time much less important than the task at hand. When I joined, the main goal for my division was to bring as much innovation as possible to the market, thus to society, through the support of highly innovative start-ups as well as through the development of a thriving entrepreneurship ecosystem in Switzerland in general. Shortly after having started, the challenge also became to ramp down the former CTI and create as well as ramp-up an entirely new organisation, Innosuisse, to pursue these goals as efficiently as possible. Although I never saw myself as a "state organisation" type of person, I love challenges, and this was a big one alongside a vision that I couldn't find more motivating.

You recently changed jobs and became COO of the Swiss Venture Group. How does this link to your previous experience at Innosuisse?

During the years spent at Innosuisse, I tried to shape the best possible public support offerings given the framework conditions, to help boost the creation and development of the most innovative start-ups. But the one most important element they needed and that we at Innosuisse couldn't give them was direct financing. So, in view of having a big impact on start-ups, that's where I wanted to go next: to work for a firm that raises funds, invests them in the most promising start-ups and thereafter accompanies them in their growth.

But beyond pure financing, can you give us some insights into what makes Swiss Venture Group so special?

Yes, Swiss Ventures Group is unique in that it not only has a Venture arm, namely Serpentine Ventures, but also comprises of "competence centre firms" that support the growth of start-ups through all types of consulting services from legal support to accounting, financial planning, M&A advisory, CFO-on-demand, and more. So it's like a mini-ecosystem in and of itself. Also, the venture firm offers a full programme of venture asset management, with lifecycle funds from the very early stage all the way to growth as well as themed funds. This holistic approach is what makes the Swiss Ventures Group truly unique.

Which topics are currently most interesting for you, and do they match what start-ups now pick up a business idea and investors are willing to finance?

Generally speaking, technologies or innovations that are in line with Industry 5.0, i.e. that are involved in the digital and green transitions for a more sustainable and resilient economy are all interesting to me. And of course, generative AI is extremely exciting, opening the door to a multitude of possibilities. I'm stoked to see how AI and neural networks will pave the way to new ideas. Beyond the technologies and great ideas, investors are willing to invest in capable and ambitious founders, which is always the key.

What is crucial for you to recommend an investment or collaboration to any of your partners in the network?

A bold, engaged, purpose and vision-led team is always what makes the difference and for me, beyond a business case that makes a lot of sense, an innovation and true market differentiation is crucial.

The theme of this issue is holistic health. How do you manage to juggle everything without burning out?

My two tricks or hacks are to fit in some sport on a regular basis, whether that's just biking to work or jogging over lunch or weekends and to get enough sleep. Fitting in enough time for my 3 boys, husband and friends isn't easy but it all works out if it's well organised. And of course, kitesurfing or snowboarding with my family during holidays is my escape and where I truly get to recharge my batteries.

The venture capital industry is very male. Also, in top management women are still rare. Do you see enough female investors interested in start-ups?

I'm getting to know more and more, and I feel that generation Z is finally catching up. Also, I believe there's a lot of interest for start-ups but maybe women generally speaking are less interested in investing in them and more into contributing, participating or supporting them. I do hope more women will be interested in investing as this is how to truly be impactful for start-ups.

They say your network is your net worth. Is that true for you as well?

Well, I wouldn't have found nor probably be considered for my new challenge had it not been for my network... and every day I help people around me by connecting them to people I know and that can support them so I do believe that networks are extremely useful. In Switzerland, we're such a small country but the networks aren't as developed as in Silicon Valley or in the London start-up ecosystem for example. We should definitely put more priority on network building as it truly brings value.

Dr Carole Ackermann

is CEO and co-founder of the company Diamondscull AG, which invests in startup companies. She is President of EHL Group (founded as Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne), the global reference in hospitality education, a member of the Board of Directors of Allianz Switzerland, BKW, BNP Paribas Suisse, and BVZ Holding, is involved in the Board of the Bernese innovation agency be-advanced and is a Senior Lecturer at the HSG and other universities.

FOTO: TOBIAS SUTTER



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