



Current challenges facing businesses and their Boards

In an interview, H el ene B egu in, chairwoman of the Board of Directors of KPMG Switzerland, asked Anne Bobillier, independent Board member and governance consultant, to talk about her career and the current topics that are important for businesses and their Boards, but also about the place of women within the latter.

H el ene B egu in: *You are currently active within several Boards. Initially, you studied computer sciences and information technology. At the time, these topics did not attract many women. Why did you make this choice and to what extent did your studies have an impact on your current roles?*

Anne Bobillier: I have always been interested in science, so I naturally chose to study science, and more particularly information technology, because I considered that it was already a forward-looking topic with interesting prospects.

It was quite visionary to think that information technology would play such an important role in the way businesses operate!

I was already familiar with this topic since my father worked for IBM in collaboration with CERN. At the time, CERN considered that information technology was crucial.

I suppose that, afterwards, working for a company such as IBM, you were at the forefront of these developments?

When I left university, I had the choice between joining a company that had an IT department to meet its own needs or to work for a constructor. I chose the latter. I was closer to what was happening and this allowed me to have an influence on the means engaged to meet the clients' needs.



To what extent was this experience beneficial and useful for your different roles thereafter?

I worked in the sales department before joining the management team. This enabled me to understand the needs of a business in terms of technology. Above all, it helped me to understand the challenges and the role of IT within the company and sense the importance it would have later.

Thereafter, after a brief experience at Ascom, you joined the Bechtle group, one of the main IT providers in Europe, but that focuses more on consulting. How was it transitioning from a global player such as IBM to a group that is more active in Europe and whose corporate culture must be very different?

IBM, when I worked there, had an Anglo-Saxon culture. Bechtle has a very Germanic tradition, but a culture of decentralization that greatly appealed to me. So, as managing director, I had plenty of leeway to define the strategy and meet the clients' needs as closely as possible.

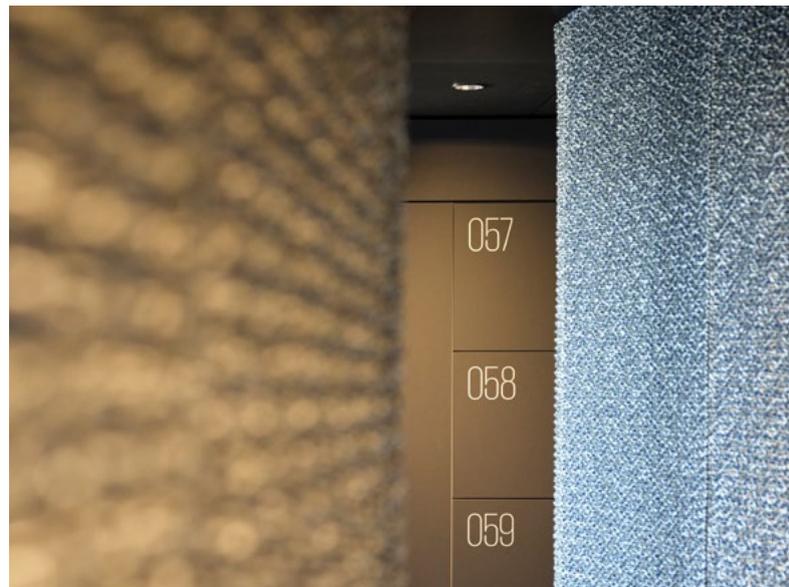
So you were able to develop your entrepreneurial skills.

Yes but not only: I also developed a sense of responsibility and risk management skills. We had to develop the business, invest locally in human or financial resources and at the same time ensure a sufficient return on these investments.

We followed a bottom-up approach, with a wealth of local skills, whilst benefiting from the synergies of a large group. At Bechtle, it was the first time that I could decide alone on the means that should be engaged.

Where did the motivation to become a Board member come from? What was your main motivation, your interest, in joining a Board?

Ten years ago, I thought about the direction I wanted to take professionally. I had spent the first two thirds of my career in IT companies with a very strong focus on management since I quickly left aside the technical side of things. I wanted to leave the IT area, broaden my horizons, take part in strategic rather than operational reflections. I thought about joining a new company, but horizontal transfers from one industry to another are extremely complicated. For a CEO role, businesses want individuals who have expertise in their area. So I followed the recommendations of Dominique Freymond, co-founder of ACAD, and attended their training course on Board fundamentals: I enjoyed role playing so much that I realized that I could join other industries and thus contribute to the strategy and development of businesses thanks to the skills I had acquired during the years I spent in the IT sector.





In 2014, you became the first female member of the Board of Directors of Skyguide. What do you remember about this first role, something that struck you in particular when you joined this first Board? What challenges did you face?

There were many challenges. When I started at Skyguide, I was immediately appointed chairwoman of a committee. I had no experience as Board member and least of all as chairwoman of a committee, the "Project" committee. I was well accepted by the members, but since I had been chosen because I was a woman, it took 3 or 4 Board meetings to overcome some reservations. Thereafter, as in any Board, things depend largely on the chairperson, on the group dynamics. The "Project" committee is particular; as far as I know, such a committee does not exist anywhere else. It monitors all of the company's major projects. I tried to do my best, as I had learned – and this is where training is very useful – and my technology skills helped me a lot. In fact, I had been recruited mainly for these skills. In any new environment, new group, one must prove oneself, take one's place.

The last time we met was at the Women's Board Award. This distinction rewards female Board members "who have the potential to become chairwoman". Did this nomination represent something special and, above all, does it give you the ambition to become chairwoman in the future?

Of course, it was flattering, because the Women's Board Award is an event that gives great visibility to the very competent female Board members in Switzerland. But to be honest, it did not change much for me, in the sense that I am at a stage in my career where such reflections have already been made. In fact, I am already chairwoman of a small company. I took part in this event because I wanted to be a role model and show other – younger – women, that there is potential and that it is feasible. Did this give me the ambition to become chairwoman? One does not take on such a role by ambition, but by conviction. I believe that one accepts the role of chairperson because one has the skills to guide the company and take part in its development. It's true that women often tend to doubt their abilities. I think that there are still many men who accept a chairman role for the prestige, and this is something that women, according to me, seek less. Personally, this is not what makes me tick.

You lead the nomination and compensation committee at Romande Energie. To what extent was the latter impacted over the last 20 months due to the crisis we have just been through?

The nomination and compensation committee is the committee that exchanges the most with human resources. Naturally, the COVID-19 crisis had an impact, but not really on nominations or compensation. It concerned rather the monitoring of the crisis, the impact on the employees' health, ensuring that actions are in line with the directives. Nominations were not called into question, because needs are defined by the strategy, and the COVID-19 crisis did not have a significant impact either on compensation, except maybe on certain variable elements. In any case, not in the Boards I am part of.

There is sometimes a dichotomy between the commitment, the measures to be taken to manage and overcome the crisis and the poor economic performance. Were there different reflections because the base model was not adapted to the situation?

That was a reality even before the COVID-19 crisis. As a rule, unfortunately, the most difficult times are those where people must show the greatest commitment. And compensation is not necessarily aligned with this. This has led many companies to reflect upon the justification of having significant variable elements for management. When I was at Raiffeisen, we decided to remove the variable part related to individual objectives from compensation at all company levels. At Romande Energie, we did the same after having engaged in fundamental reflections, and this is a trend that is more and more observed. There is still a variable part related to the company's results, but in a general way.





There is much talk about diversity. I prefer to focus on the mix between the individuals who form a group within management or a Board. How would you define an appropriate mix or appropriate diversity?

For me, diversity is multifold. Of course, there is gender diversity, which is much talked about, but diversity must also be ensured as regards competences, experiences and cultures. In companies active in Switzerland, regional representation is crucial. At international level, it means representing the significant markets in which a company operates. An appropriate mix is also beneficial as regards age/ experience. If there are only old hands, these might sometimes lack a bit of naivety or modernity, in the positive sense, when making decisions. Diversity consists in ensuring an appropriate balance between all these elements. But if I must focus on one in particular, it is competence.

You mentioned the fact that you had been designated Board member because you were a woman. Is this not rather simplistic? Is this not what will be remembered rather than the fact that the person was chosen for their competences?

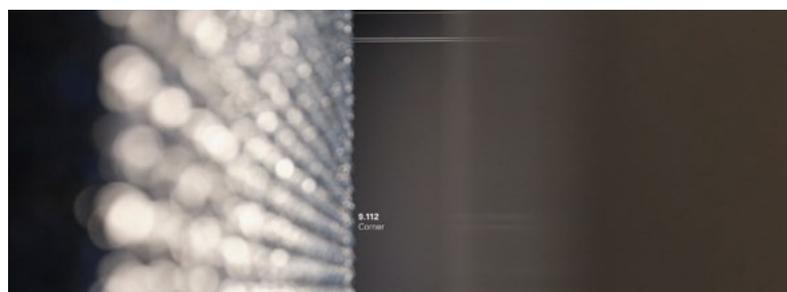
It is up to the Board and the person in question to put things into context. Each time I was asked "how did you get there?", I answer that it's true that, at Skyguide, I was designated because I was a woman, but that I was so much more than that! I had the skills required for the role and, between several candidates with equal competences, they preferred a woman. In the past, candidates were all men, they were not all incompetent. Today, they are sometimes only women, but this does not necessarily mean that these lack competences.

You said earlier that compensation has evolved, that variable elements are sometimes discarded. Have you, in your reflections, integrated compensation based on ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) KPIs or is it a bit too soon?

Without linking them to variable compensation, we have set ESG objectives for our management because this topic is part of our strategy, as for most companies nowadays I suppose. And we must be able to measure developments in that area.

Variable compensation is generally an incentive to encourage management to reach strategy-related and, consequently, ESG-related objectives.

Does variable compensation really motivate a management team to take a certain direction? With ESG pillars, are people not more motivated by what is meaningful and to contribute to a better world, by contributing to these pillars? I believe that many members of management are more motivated by the implementation of these strategic elements and by the meaning this gives to what they do rather than by a few tens of thousands of francs more or less.





One sees, however, that, in this area, many companies sometimes need to review their organization, their culture or their business model. Is this a real challenge for some of them?

I do not know of any company that managed to achieve a radical cultural change simply by setting financial incentives for its management. This cannot work. Deeper reflections are needed. Management must be convinced by the Board's expectations and this must be done together. What is important is to be convinced that it is not only "fashionable," but that it is a real challenge for the future, not only the future of our planet, but also that of the company.

Is it a strategic challenge for the company?

Today, any management team that thinks that its company will be able to go on polluting and producing goods that are harmful to human health and that its clients will adhere to that, are on the wrong track. The new generations of clients attach great importance to sustainability as a whole. It is not a question of being fashionable. We want our clients to continue buying our products and that the latter meet their expectations.

If a management team does not understand this challenge, the question I ask myself as a Board member is not whether we should set variable objectives, but rather whether we have the appropriate managers to lead these strategic changes!

Thank you, Anne, for your time and the quality of our exchange.

Hélène Béguin

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About Anne Bobillier

In 2014, Anne Bobillier became the first woman to be elected to the Board of Directors of Skyguide, where she also serves as Vice-Chairwoman of the Board. In 2016, she was appointed to the Board of Directors of Romande Energie Holding, where she chairs the Remuneration and Nomination Committee and also acts as Vice-Chairwoman of the Board. Since 2020, Anne Bobillier is also a member of the Board of Directors of Rolex SA, Chairwoman of the Board of Directors of Skyguide's SkySoft-ATM subsidiary, a member of the Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie France Suisse and a member of the Board of SwissBoardForum.

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