



HANS HELMUT SCHETTER ENJOYS WORKING WITH STUDENTS



HOW DO YOU ATTRACT YOUNG EMPLOYEES TO THE COMPANY?
AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR HANS HELMUT SCHETTER,
MEMBER OF THE EXECUTIVE BOARD RESPONSIBLE FOR HUMAN RESOURCES

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You find young teams working on lots of projects, such as the Golden Ears Bridge in Vancouver. Does extensive experience still count for something these days?

It is in fact true that one in three engineers we hire is a young graduate. But that is not a policy. We also sometimes employ 50- or 60-year-old experienced specialists in areas such as project controlling. The overall age structure must be right, just like in sports. The young talent keeps the older players on their toes.

You are a civil engineer. When you look back, what has changed since you started out in the profession?

We were influenced by a certain bourgeois automatism. In my day, you studied, married and then had children. When the first child arrived, the wife usually stayed at home, even if she had the better job. Today, husband and wife both study and both work, sometimes even in different cities or countries, yet still want to start a family. It's not easy to achieve all of these things.

Isn't it still usually the mother who gives up her job to look after the children?

That's not something that we can rely on. What's important is that we are flexible as an employer. For me it is a matter of course that we have a positive attitude toward the desire to take parental leave.

Does everyone in the company see things that way?

Many people in management recognize that times have changed and are accommodating and flexible. Others less so. As a company, we have a certain responsibility to society. We are used to being flexible: our business is fairly unpredictable—sometimes orders come too early, while other times they are late or there are too many. The nature of our business is such that we have to adapt to changing situations.

How do you communicate that in a company with 50,000 employees?

I do so constantly at events for young professionals, at management seminars and conferences, in business meetings and in informal discussions.

Then there will certainly be more female engineers at Bilfinger Berger in the future. They currently account for less than 10 percent of the total.

That's right. We took on our first female civil engineer in 1990 in Frankfurt. She's still with us today. She had two children and worked from home for a period and then returned to the office. Around a quarter of the young engineers in my lectures today are women. We couldn't and wouldn't want to overlook them if we want to attract the best talent.

The key thing is that the team is right ...

... like on Sundays on the soccer field. It's just that we don't play against another team, but are concerned instead with the task at hand — the project. We are a people-driven company that provides young professionals with incredible opportunities. The Executive Board aides, for

of a building, but also the question of which materials are of value after demolition or, even better, which can be reused? This is an aspect that also needs to be considered in the planning of a building.

And you've come across some clever students?

Exactly. I am usually accompanied by a young colleague. We look at those students who have made a good impression in the lectures and try to establish a line of contact with them.

The company works closely with many universities.

How do you benefit from that?

There are degree and doctoral thesis subjects that are of interest both to the university and to us. We cooperate in such cases, and we also work on common research goals. With the Technical University of

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example, play a key role in our human resources development. They are talented young people, with degrees or doctorates, recommended by their professors, who come straight from university and work on Executive Board issues for a few months, or a maximum of a year, before they move on to operative tasks.

A thirty-year-old telling an experienced foreman in his mid-fifties what to do just because he has an impressive resumé — can that work?

A good resumé is not enough. Young recruits must show the ability to manage other people, which requires social skills. If the thirty-year-old succeeds in winning over the fifty- or sixty-year-old, both stand to benefit from one another.

Aren't you expecting a bit too much from young people?

I teach as an honorary professor at the Technical University in Darmstadt and I really enjoy working with students. They turn up on time, listen attentively and are keen to learn. My subject is the life cycle of buildings. This not only concerns the construction and management

Darmstadt, we developed a calculation method for the life cycle costing of building operation stages, for example. We identify our graduate recruits in the universities through cooperation activities like this.

Do today's graduates have a different relationship to senior management?

The relationship has become less conventional. The executive floors with their directors were once a revered institution. We are closer to the young people today. But in the end, age and gender are not really issues that concern us. Project managers don't have to be old or young, male or female, but just good at their job, and preferably not monosyllabic. A good sense of humor is also important.

And a certain degree of mobility, as projects are being carried out all over the world.

Mobility is indispensable for us. However, sometimes it is a requirement that cannot be met immediately for understandable reasons. In such circumstances, we must also be prepared as managers to stand behind our employees.